

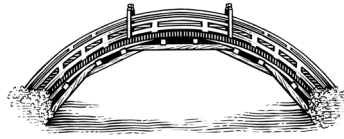
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis's

Girt by Sea: Re-Imagining Australia's Security

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Sarah Teo

Matthew Sussex

Maria Rost Rublee

Joanne Wallis and Rebecca Strating

Recalibrating Australia's Strategy toward Its Maritime Neighborhood

Sarah Teo

At its core, Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis's book *Girt by Sea: Re-Imagining Australia's Security* calls for an overhaul in the way that Australian policymakers have approached the country's maritime neighborhood. The book offers an alternative perspective to the assessment of Australia's maritime security interests and strategies beyond the lens of U.S.-China competition and, by extension, beyond Canberra's relationships with Beijing and Washington. Noting that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government has embraced a "defence-led approach to security" (p. 3), Strating and Wallis argue that nonmilitary tools of statecraft are equally crucial, given the "multiple dimensions of Australia that need to be secured" (p. 8). These dimensions include Australia's "physical territory, infrastructure and population, but also its institutions of governance, economy, environment and society" (p. 8). When extrapolated to cooperation with regional neighbors, this means taking a whole-of-government approach to issues such as climate change and transnational crime.

The path to this reconceptualization of Australia's security would be to "interrogate the constructed idea of 'Australia' that foreign and defence policymakers are seeking to defend, and to think critically about the meaning of 'security'" (p. 4). Strating and Wallis approach this task through a close examination of six maritime regions surrounding Australia—namely, the north seas, western Pacific, South China Sea, South Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Southern Ocean. In each regionally focused chapter, the authors start by discussing the significance of the region to Australia's interests, highlight the salient challenges facing that region, outline Canberra's current policy approach, and suggest what Australia should do differently.

It is easy to see why the approach taken by Strating and Wallis might not immediately appeal to some parts of the Australian foreign policy and national security community. The authors critically question four conventional assumptions that have characterized the country's strategic imagination. These are, specifically, the belief about Australia's

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need for security guarantors; fears about being abandoned by these security guarantors; ambivalence about seeking security “from its region or from within its region”; and stake in a liberal rules-based order (p. 11). The “calls for change...to reimagine Australia’s security,” as the authors acknowledge, could be “dismissed as impractical, idealistic and naive” (p. 231). Amid intensifying great-power competition and what seems like a resurgence of traditional balance-of-power politics, hardheaded realists are unlikely to heed this call to reimagine security—particularly if it leads to a relative de-prioritization of military approaches and, as a corollary, the Australia-U.S. alliance. Strating and Wallis, however, stress in a reflective closing that their efforts here are precisely “because Australia’s security is too important to be allowed to rely on unchallenged assumptions or sentimental attachments to old orders” (p. 231).

The book’s analysis contributes to the current literature and discourse on Australia’s foreign and security policy in three main ways—the first two being more conceptual, and the third being more empirical. The first contribution is in the reconceptualization of Australia’s approach to security beyond the “dependent ally” tradition.¹ Although this is not a completely new take, much of the relevant literature has focused on making the case for Australia to diversify its security relationships by identifying like-minded partners, as well as on demonstrating evidence (or lack thereof) of agency in the country’s security relationships.² The relative novelty of Strating and Wallis’s approach, then, is their emphasis for Australia to expand its connections by promoting cooperation on pertinent transnational security challenges that affect the respective maritime regions. The countries in these regions may not always be “like-minded” to Australia in values or political systems—or even in their visions of the global and regional order (p. 218)—but they would share a common interest in making their respective regions safe and secure.

The second conceptual contribution of the book is in the distinction it makes between a rules-based order and a U.S.-led order. Noting that “Australian leaders have relied on the slippery notion that a U.S.-led order and a rules-based order are essentially the same thing,” Strating and Wallis

¹ Brendan Taylor, “Australian Agency and the China-U.S. Contest for Supremacy,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2025): 1–18 ~ <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2471360>.

² See, for example, Peter Dean, “Australia’s ‘Taiwan Problem’: Middle-Power Agency and the Self-Centeredness of the Australian National Debate,” *Asia Policy* 19, no. 2 (2024): 29–39 ~ <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2024.a927085>; and Michael Fullilove, “How Australia Should Deal with Trump,” Lowy Institute, August 202 ~ <https://interactives.loyinstitute.org/features/2024-us-presidential-election/donald-trump/article/trump-and-australia>.

caution against such a conflation (p. 112). Indeed, as they note, Washington “has ignored or neglected the rules” in various instances, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (p. 112). To be sure, the authors are not the first to point out Washington’s disregard for some rules. What is interesting, however, from a conceptual angle is the explicit distinction being made between a rules-based order and a U.S.-led order. Broadly defined, international order “refers to the settled rules and arrangements that guide the relations among states.”³ A “rules-based” order is framed by international law and institutions, while a “U.S.-led” order is characterized by arrangements in which the United States is dominant. Australia has benefited from both these orders over the years—and, presumably, regards them as highly interlinked—but the differences between them are likely to become starker under an “America first” policy.⁴ The question for Australia, then, is whether it will continue to pursue U.S. primacy in the various maritime regions or seek to reinforce a rules-based order in which the United States may not necessarily be dominant.

This leads us to the third contribution of the book, which is more empirical. Amid a period of instability in global affairs, the authors offer timely recommendations for the Australian government to re-examine baseline assumptions about national security, its U.S. alliance, and relations with China, as well as to work with regional countries on key challenges affecting their security. The return of a Donald Trump administration in the United States has been accompanied by Washington’s criticisms against so-called free-riding allies, anxieties about U.S.-China relations, and a return to U.S. hard-power tactics.⁵ Certainly, as a recent study by George Boone and Thomas Wilkins has shown, Australia may not have that much to worry about given that it is a “genuine net contributor” to the alliance.⁶ The shake-ups caused by U.S. policies, nevertheless, will affect the broader strategic context within which Australia operates. It is therefore vital for

³ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

⁴ Ivo Daalder, “Like It or Not, the Rules-Based Order Is No More,” *Politico*, February 5, 2025 ~ <https://www.politico.eu/article/rules-based-order-prime-minister-mette-frederiksen-us-president-donald-trump-greenland-power-politics>.

⁵ Nicholas Khoo, “Friend or Foe? How Trump’s Threats against ‘Free-Riding’ Allies Could Backfire,” *Conversation*, January 21, 2025 ~ <https://theconversation.com/friend-or-foe-how-trumps-threats-against-free-riding-allies-could-backfire-247800>; and Peter Baker, “Trump Favors Blunt Force in Dealing with Foreign Allies and Enemies Alike,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2025 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/02/us/politics/trump-tariffs-migrants-power.html>.

⁶ George Boone and Thomas Wilkins, “Some U.S. Allies Contribute, Some Loaf. Here’s a Numerical Assessment,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, February 26, 2025 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/some-us-allies-contribute-some-loaf-heres-a-numerical-assessment>.

policymakers in Canberra to thoroughly assess the fundamentals of the country's foreign and security policy.

The call for Australia to have a whole-of-government national maritime strategy is also compelling (pp. 221–25). Strating and Wallis repeatedly underline that because maritime security encompasses various aspects—“strategic, economic, human and environmental”—Australia's maritime strategy must correspondingly be well equipped to address the comprehensive range of challenges (p. 32). In chapter 2 on Australia's north seas, for instance, the authors highlight the missing dimension of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in Canberra's maritime security strategy (pp. 51–52). Similarly, for the Indian Ocean, the authors juxtapose Australian and U.S. concerns with geopolitics against the other island states' apprehension over climate change that results in this group's preference to stay out of great-power rivalries (p. 174). One area that would have benefited from more concrete recommendations reflecting the whole-of-government spirit was the concluding section (“What Should Australia Do Differently?”) in chapter 4 on the South China Sea. Given the geopolitical dynamics that have become increasingly evident in the South China Sea disputes, it would have been helpful to the authors' argument if they had made more specific suggestions for what Australia could do in addressing transnational security challenges and how those initiatives might contribute to stability in the South China Sea.

Overall, *Girt by Sea* is a refreshing approach to conceptualizing Australia's national security in the maritime domain. The book presents a thoughtful and extensively researched argument about why and how Australian leaders and policymakers should reassess their interests and strategies in the country's maritime neighborhoods. Though the approach advocated by Wallis and Strating might appear to some as unconventional, it is nonetheless an important endeavor. ♦

Smooth Sailing or Troubled Waters? Australia Girt by Sea

Matthew Sussex

Making sense of Australia's strategic geography—and taking in the historical and normative drivers of Australian foreign policy in the process—has long been a fascination of academics and commentators trying to better understand what role the country can and might play in regional security affairs. It is therefore not surprising that, in trying to come to grips with what has often been termed an argument over Australia's identity and history, attempts by Australian scholars to examine this theme in depth themselves tend to reflect that same dualism.

Girt by Sea: Re-Imagining Australia's Security, by Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis, is no exception to that phenomenon. On the one hand, it makes a compelling argument that Australia has tended to see its security through the lens of four strategic reflexes: a belief that it needs powerful security guarantors located far from its shores, a subsequent fear of abandonment by its great and powerful friends, a tension between whether it seeks security within its region or from it, and a preference for a rules-based order, typically cast in terms of liberal values. On the other, these reflexes together in turn throw up a number of paradoxes for Australian policymakers. How can they ensure that distant security allies remain interested in supporting Australia's interests while simultaneously not becoming so interested that Canberra is entrapped into de facto policy defaults to follow great-power whims? The potential tension between divergent alliance expectations plays as a kind of a leitmotif throughout the book, with the authors cautioning that Australia should seek a clear and independent foreign and security policy role within existing alliance structures and forge a more focused sense of priorities that give better shape to Australian strategic fundamentals.

Of course, it is one thing to call for such independence. It is another thing altogether to achieve this, especially since—as the authors correctly observe—one of the central tenets of Australian security policymaking has been to try and avoid such a definitive approach to how it deals with its U.S. security ally. Likewise, it is axiomatic that great powers are also

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able to exert significant pressure on smaller alliance partners to secure their acquiescence. How Australia might be able to successfully chart such a course, within the confines of its main security partnership, is not something that is readily obvious from the book. But this is not in itself a criticism; indeed, it is merely reflective of the puzzles that dominate Australian security policy thinking and that tend to defy solutions because of the manner in which they are framed.

This is especially the case when it comes to alternatives. A key strength of the book is the argument by Strating and Wallis that Australia needs to not just be selectively mindful of its history but also to own it in its totality. At the same time, the authors make the insightful observation that Australia's geographic position is actually an enabler for its strategic policy, and that viewing Australia's role mainly through the prism of military affairs has contributed to "sea blindness" about the maritime character that should be at the heart of Canberra's security policy planning. The book's call for a regional geopolitics that encompasses human and environmental as well as geopolitical and economic considerations is both welcome and refreshing in this context.

How might this be put into practice? Wallis and Strating sensibly eschew the amorphous Indo-Pacific security concept, seeing it as neither as a region nor a strategy but rather a convenient foil for Australia to legitimate particularistic strategic narratives. As the authors neatly put it, the Indo-Pacific is the equivalent of a Rorschach test: it is either a symbol of economic interconnectedness across vast tracts of maritime real estate or a less than subtle way to justify the containment of China (p. 21).

As a novel alternative way of framing the security environment, Strating and Wallis propose a sea-based approach that encompasses the north seas, the western Pacific, the South China Sea, the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Southern Ocean. Helpfully, the authors place the main thrust of their analysis and argument within a common section of each chapter seeking to identify what Australia should do differently in each maritime domain.

The purpose of this is to advocate in part for a broader, whole-of-government approach to security, which was identified as an important part of policy planning in Australia's Defence Strategy Review in 2023. Fortunately, the authors go further than that document, which was often irritatingly vague on what national security and defense posture could (or should) look like in an attempt to reimagine security. On this topic, Strating and Wallis argue that a holistic security approach is needed to integrate

the various arms of statecraft that might then seek to deal with complex and interrelated security concerns. This, they argue, would lead to a more nuanced understanding of security challenges, although they do not provide many clues to how these might be prioritized or what the determining criteria for such an undertaking might be.

A third prescription in the book is for a humble but confident foreign and security policy. The need for this is most evident in the South Pacific, where Australia's approach has often been seen as paternalistic and, at best, indifferent to the environmental and developmental priorities of the nations within this domain. But it extends to relations with Southeast Asian nations as well, where too often Australia's security posture has been interpreted as acting like little more than a U.S. proxy. Indeed, navigating uncertainty in those maritime spaces is not only being thrown into sharp relief by the chaotic Trump administration but also presenting challenges for Australia in terms of Strating and Wallis's fourth prescriptive theme—how the country can engage empathetically with those whose interests do not neatly align with its own. These concerns are also evident in the book's related calls for a cooperative and long-term (rather than situational, hierarchical, and transactional) approach to regional security relations.

Overall, *Girt by Sea* is a valuable and very thoughtful attempt to identify a nuanced, independent, and confident Australian approach to national security. The authors should be congratulated for a rare achievement in Australian security policy thinking: developing an approach that is conceptually novel as well as empirically persuasive. Although I admit to some early skepticism, I have come around to the idea that their "oceans" approach works quite well, even though these domains are overlapping and frequently contain security conundrums that make consistent and coherent planning across them difficult.

Environmental agendas in the Southern Ocean and South Pacific, for instance, are doubtless important as long-term challenges. But the nature of security planning remains fundamentally conventional and threat-based, and so it would seem unlikely that future governments will be swayed from a lens that remains hierarchical in geographic scope and analytical in theme. In short, in regions beset by security dilemmas stemming from great powers—in Northeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean—military-security matters and hard economic concerns will continue to capture the minds of policymakers out of fear for their capacity to inflict imminent harms on Australian security and prosperity.

However, this should not take away from the fact that *Girt by Sea* is one of the more important contributions on Australian security policymaking to emerge in the last two decades. The book's scope is ambitious and its analysis is sound. Though it is sometimes a little cautious on the details of how a reimagined Australian approach to security might be operationalized, that is far more reflective of the sticky nature of the problems Australia faces—and has in some cases inadvertently constructed for itself—than of a failure to think through what alternatives might look like. ♦

Strategic Imagination and the Future of Australian National Security Thinking

Maria Rost Rublee

In their book *Girt by Sea: Re-Imaging Australia's Security*, Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis make a compelling case for a broad reframing of Australian national security, with a focus on the need to include a holistic perspective of the maritime domain. The book provides six detailed case studies of the maritime spaces critical to Australian security: the “north seas,” the western Pacific, the South China Sea, the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Southern Ocean. In each, the authors examine the case’s historical importance to Australia, its contemporary relevance to Australia’s security, and Australia’s current policy approach. They conclude each study with insightful policy recommendations to help Canberra integrate maritime issues into its larger national security portfolio while strengthening its relations with regional countries and upholding the rules-based order.

At its heart, *Girt by Sea* is a gentle but compelling challenge to typical conceptions of national security in Australia—conceptions that define and sometimes limit knowledge, spaces, and policymaking within government, think tanks, and universities. The authors question and sometimes openly confront the defense-led, often sea-blind approach to national security policy, knowledge, and community. Their challenge comes at an opportune time, as Australia’s strategic environment is in serious flux, particularly given uncertainty generated by the second Trump administration in the United States. In this review, I discuss three of Strating and Wallis’s most important critiques of Australian national security thinking: the need for a broader conception of security, deeper attention to the maritime domain, and investment in genuine regional relationships. I then offer thoughts on how the authors—and hopefully others in the field—can strengthen and build upon this significant work through an examination of strategic imagination.

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Challenges to Australian National Security Thinking

Expanding “national security.” Strating and Wallis openly tackle the narrow, defense-centric idea of security that dominates conversations about strategic issues. When national security is discussed in Australia, two competing paradigms overshadow everything else: Forward Defence and Defence of Australia. As Dunley notes, these “two broad approaches to Australian security [are] defined by whether that security needs to begin at the edge of the continent, or further afield.”¹ Yet these approaches are packed with unexamined assumptions about what needs to be secured, for whom, against whom, and by what methods. Throughout the book, Strating and Wallis push their readers to consider a more expansive view of national security. They offer detailed evidence for why these questions must be enlarged, not only for moral reasons but for practical ones. For example, climate change must be included in the national security agenda, not only because it affects Torres Strait Islanders and Australia’s neighbors in the Pacific, but also because defense readiness can be dramatically impacted by climate change.

Taking maritime spaces seriously. The book offers another significant challenge to dominant paradigms in Australian national security: the lack of real attention paid to maritime issues. AUKUS (the security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) has helped change this, but the maritime domain is much more than nuclear-propelled submarines. The authors’ detailed case studies underscore why maritime spaces must be better incorporated *into* and *across* our national security thinking and policy, and they provide numerous disquieting statistics to show how dependent Australia is on maritime trade. In doing so, they highlight both the country’s vulnerability to maritime conflict and the urgent need to strengthen its maritime capability—not only in terms of equipment and human capital but also in programs, diplomacy, and simple government attention.

For example, Australian shipping is almost completely dependent on foreign-flagged ships; over 99% of trade is carried by foreign-flagged vessels (p. 224). As another example, Australia imports more than 90% of its refined fuel. If maritime oil supply lines were cut off in conflict, not only would economic activity be significantly affected but also defense capacity. As Strating and Wallis note, foreign supplies provide much of

¹ Richard Dunley, “The End of the ‘Lucky Country’? Understanding the Failure of the AUKUS Policy Debate,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. (2023): 317.

“the aviation fuel the Australian Defence Force needs for operations, particularly in a conflict scenario” (p. 225). The policy implications of these statistics are grave and obvious. To reduce dependence on foreign shipping, Canberra is considering the development of a sovereign fleet. Yet, how many ships are needed to truly provide some measure of independence, and how will the government fund, build, and crew them? To reduce dependence on foreign fuel so that it cannot be held hostage by the interruption of sea lanes, Australia needs to develop greater energy independence. As the authors argue, “Over the longer term, Australia’s sovereignty is inextricably bound with its energy security, and replacing imported fuel with more renewable energy sources should therefore be viewed as a strategic imperative” (p. 225). Even just these two examples hammer home the point that security is much broader than a narrow defense conception—climate change, maritime spaces, energy policy, and human capital are all critical to securing Australia.

Building genuine regional relationships. Strating and Wallis offer a third challenge to Australia’s national security community: focusing on regional relationship building—more than purely transactional, crisis-driven diplomacy—is essential to “hard” security objectives. To do so requires humility, empathy, and a genuine desire to understand the perspectives of the country’s neighbors (pp. 154–55). Strating and Wallis ask whether Australia can “accept that its neighbours and regional partners do not necessarily share its threat perceptions, nor its view of the best ways to achieve security” (p. 227). A willingness to engage genuinely with regional states could then lead to new understandings within Australia about its own security interests, opening up options and opportunities. Although this argument is not new to either author, the book’s detailed case studies make the point exceptionally well.²

Building on Girt by Sea: Defining and Implementing Strategic Imagination


Girt by Sea is a trade book rather than an academic treatise, which is another of its key strengths. It is written to appeal to policymakers, citizens, and students; it is for sale in airports and bookstores. It was launched

² See, for example, Rebecca Strating, “The Rules-Based Order as Rhetorical Entrapment: Comparing Maritime Dispute Resolution in the Indo-Pacific,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 3 (2023): 372–409; and Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia’s Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2017).

by Foreign Minister Penny Wong and has been discussed at high-level conferences of policymakers. No academic could hope for more! That said, from an academic perspective, the book has areas for further development and future research. In this review, I focus specifically on the academic and policy development of “strategic imagination.”

The conceptual and theoretical development of strategic imagination. As a concept, strategic imagination is used heavily in *Girt by Sea*; the phrase and its corollaries are found not only in titles and subtitles but throughout the text. While a trade book cannot spend much time on theory and definitions, further exploration of the concept would be a useful follow-on project. Is strategic imagination meant to simply refer to thinking more broadly and creatively about foreign policy? Or do the authors mean to draw from marketing, management, and communication literature?³ Translating business concepts into use for international relations research is not new, but doing so requires careful consideration. For example, much of the strategic imagination literature focuses on agents rather than organizations, but national security policy is constructed by organizations as well as individuals. Violina Rindova and Luis Martins argue that strategic imagination encapsulates three key skills: anticipatory thinking, analogical reasoning, and design thinking.⁴ To what extent can these be applied to a policymaking apparatus or, even more broadly, an epistemic community? Currently, little work has applied strategic imagination to international relations,⁵ and further theoretically informed treatment could be extremely useful.

Can strategic imagination flourish in national security communities? It is hard to disagree with Strating and Wallis’s arguments for strategic imagination in Australian national security policy. What is needed next, however, is a roadmap for achieving it. National security communities tend to be closed; roadblocks for women and people of color in the field’s

³ See, for example, Stan Glaser, “The Strategic Imagination,” *Management Decision* 32, no. 6 (1994): 31–34; Richard B. Gunderman, “Strategic Imagination,” *American Journal of Roentgenology* 175, no. 4 (2000): 973–76; and Jonathan Schroeder, “Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination,” *InVisible Culture* 18 (2013)  <https://www.invisibleculturejournal.com/pub/snapshot-aesthetics/rel ease/1?readingCollection=c857575b>.

⁴ Violina P. Rindova and Luis L. Martins, “The Three Minds of the Strategist: Toward an Agentic Perspective in Behavioral Strategy,” in *Behavioral Strategy in Perspective*, ed. Mie Augier, Christina Fang, and Violina P. Rindova (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 167–79.

⁵ Holger Mölder, “The Prospects of Strategic Imagination in Explaining International Security Challenges,” *Quality and Quantity* 57 (2023): 55–76.

academic and policy careers are well-documented globally.⁶ Within Australia, the problem may be worse than in typical democracies. The country's two main political parties—Labor on the left and Liberals on the right—tend toward bipartisanship in foreign affairs and security policy, which means that disagreement and dissension are less likely to be seen as routine and acceptable.

In addition, numerous analysts have expressed consternation about the quality of the Australian national security debate, with some indicating concerns about censorship and self-censorship.⁷ As Elizabeth Buchanan argues,

Australia has all but institutionalised self-censorship in intellectual strategic thought...We have curated an intellectual space in which the same voices exist in harmonious agreement. Most strategic analysis or intellectual work tends to be churned out by design, not debate. Who needs robustness, let alone nuance?⁸

For example, on the topic of the U.S. alliance, Dunley notes that Australians tend to stare at U.S. security umbrella “believing it to be the sky”—a trend at least partially attributable to a lack of robust discussion about the Australia-U.S. relationship.⁹

With only a small number of national security think tanks (most of which receive at least some government funding), universities are important potential sources of strategic imagination. However, Australian universities do not offer tenured positions as such; staff still need to meet performance metrics. Part of those performance metrics relate to grant funding, and most grant funding in the national security space comes from the federal government. Therefore, academics may be less likely to question or disturb

⁶ Kelebogile Zvobgo et al., “Race and Racial Exclusion in Security Studies: A Survey of Scholars,” *Security Studies* 32, no. 4–5 (2023): 593–621; Maria Rost Rublee et al., “Do You Feel Welcome? Gendered Experiences in International Security Studies,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 216–26; Naazneen H. Barma, “The Leaky Pipeline,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 27, 2020 ~ <https://defense360.csis.org/the-leaky-pipeline>; and Constance Duncombe et al., “Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Canadian Security Studies,” *PS: Politics and Political Science* 58, no 1 (2025) 1–12.

⁷ Dunley, “The End of the ‘Lucky Country’?”; Elizabeth Buchanan, “The Sad State of Australia’s Security Discourse,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, May 8, 2024; Hugh White, “Sleepwalk to War: Australia’s Unthinking Alliance with America,” *Quarterly Essay* 86 (2022); and Emma Shortis, *Our Exceptional Friend: Australia’s Fatal Alliance with the United States* (Collingwood: Hardie Grant Publishing, 2021).

⁸ Buchanan, “The Sad State of Australia’s Security Discourse.”

⁹ Dunley, “The End of the ‘Lucky Country’?” 319.

accepted thinking, lest they undermine their ability to secure funding necessary to meet their university requirements.¹⁰

Thus, if Australia needs to develop its strategic imagination, how can it do so when members of the national security community are incentivized to color within the lines and may be punished if they push against agreed-upon boundaries? Strating and Wallis stress the fact that inclusion of diverse voices is key to broadening our conceptions of security. Australia already has significant issues with diversity within the defense and foreign policy establishment.¹¹ To what extent will there be internal and external pressure to further disincentivize diversity, equity, and inclusion, given the example of the U.S. government crackdown on such frameworks?

This problem is complex and not easily solved. It is also not the central focus of *Girt by Sea*. However, to answer the authors' call for broader, more creative national security imagination, it is imperative to confront, dissect, analyze, and generate solutions to this challenge. ♦

¹⁰ Sian Troath, "The Political Economy of Australian Militarism: On the Emergent Military-Industrial-Academic Complex," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (2023)  <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogad018>.

¹¹ James Blackwell and Julie Ballangarry, "Foreign Policy Futures," in *The Routledge Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures*, ed. Bronwyn Carlson et al. (London: Routledge, 2023), 26–39; Jenny Hayward-Jones et al., "Foreign Territory: Women in International Relations," Lowy Institute, July 9, 2019; and Elise Stephenson, *The Face of the Nation: Gendered Institutions in International Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Authors' Response: Reimagining Australia's Security Is More Urgent Than Ever

Joanne Wallis and Rebecca Strating

We approached our proposal that Australia should “reimagine” its security with some trepidation. As we argue in *Girt by Sea: Re-Imagining Australia's Security*, the imagination of the Australian national security community (of which we are part) has long been bound by four key assumptions. The first is that Australia needs security guarantors but is separated by the “tyranny of distance” from those states that could reasonably be expected to play such a role.¹ Second, it is widely assumed that Australia should fear being “abandoned”² by the “great and powerful friend[s]”³ it has chosen as those guarantors. A third assumption is that Australia should feel uncertain about whether it should seek security from or within its region—depending, typically, on the potential adversaries it is anxious about at the time. Fourth is the assumption that Australia values an international order that is based on rules, preferably rules that purport to be liberal. Long-standing bipartisan consensus on Australia's security and defense policy has meant that these assumptions have largely gone unchallenged at a political level.

But as the three thoughtful review essays on our book highlight, whether these four assumptions are the best way to advance Australia's security is increasingly questionable. Indeed, as Matthew Sussex observes, these assumptions “throw up a number of paradoxes for Australian policymakers,” with the most pressing question being, “How can they ensure that distant security allies remain interested in supporting Australia's

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¹ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1966).

² Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*, rev. ed. (Carlton: La Trobe University Press, 2021).

³ Robert Menzies quoted in A. W. Martin, “Menzies, Sir Robert Gordon (Bob) (1894–1978),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 15, 1940–1980, *Kem-Pie*, ed. John Ritchie (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000).

interests while simultaneously not becoming so interested that Canberra is entrapped into de facto policy defaults to follow great-power whims?”


The paradox Sussex identifies goes to the core of Australia’s most important contemporary challenge: how can it maintain its security alliance with the United States—which is the bedrock of its foreign and security policy—while simultaneously developing and deepening the partnerships with other countries that are essential in our more unsettled world? As Sarah Teo points out, reconceptualizing Australia’s approach beyond the “dependent ally” tradition is not new.⁴ Yet, questions about the reliability and costs of the alliance have become more acute since the second Trump administration was inaugurated. In late March 2025, former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull even convened a forum in Canberra for one hundred Australian thinkers to debate the alliance. He then delivered a speech in which he called for Australian politicians to “get off your knees and stand up for Australia” in their dealings with the United States.⁵

As we make clear in our book, we do not advocate that Australia should step away from its U.S. alliance (although we do note that the text of the ANZUS Treaty originally negotiated between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States commits the United States to do very little other than consult Australia if the latter is threatened; the United States withdrew its guarantee to New Zealand in 1986). We are also realistic about Australia’s reliance on U.S. defense materiel (and its subsequent sustainment). This deep interoperability between the Australian Defence Force and the U.S. military means that Australia’s defense capability is inextricably linked to the United States.

Nonetheless, we do argue that there needs to be more open debate about a backup plan. If Australia cannot depend on the United States, how will it otherwise seek its security? How can Australia better pursue its independence within the alliance structure and keep a range of strategic options open in future?

Rethinking or abandoning the alliance remains a fringe view. Dominant voices in the Australian national security community continue to advocate for the alliance, and this view is shared among most policymakers. We are concerned, however, that many alliance advocates assume that continuity

⁴ Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵ Malcolm Turnbull, “Sovereignty and Security—Australia and the New World Disorder” (speech at the National Press Club, Canberra, April 1, 2025)  <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/sovereignty-and-security-australia-and-the-new-world-disorder>.

within the U.S. bureaucracy will help smooth over bumps caused by the Trump administration. However, as Donald Trump has sought to remake the bureaucracy in a much more organized and comprehensive way than during his first term, we are not convinced that lessons from Trump 1.0 still hold. This requires the Australian national security community to think much more deeply about how to hedge against dependence on the United States, including by reassessing Australia's relationships with other partners in the region.

We are also concerned about the United States effectively vacating the field as a source of soft power in the world through the cuts the Trump administration has made to, for example, the State Department, USAID, and other important programs. Another difference between Trump 1.0 and 2.0 that we worry is not getting enough attention in Australian national security debates is the effect of U.S. retrenchment on international order and the rule of law. As a middle power, Australia relies on the rules-based order to advance its foreign and strategic policy interests.⁶ Teo rightly points out that in our book we distinguish “between a rules-based order and a U.S.-led order” and ask whether—given global ruptures—Australia “will continue to pursue U.S. primacy...or seek to reinforce a rules-based order in which the United States may not necessarily be dominant.” We are concerned that, even if “normal transmission” resumes under a new administration in 2029, structural changes to the international order are occurring that will not be easily wound back.

Both Sussex and Maria Rost Rublee highlight our call for the maritime domain to be foregrounded in Australia's security debates, and Teo praises our novel approach of examining the central puzzles of Australian security policy through a maritime lens. As Sussex rightly observes, “Australia's geographic position is actually an enabler for its strategic policy, and that viewing Australia's role mainly through the prism of military affairs has contributed to ‘sea blindness’ about the maritime character that should be at the heart of Canberra's security policy planning.” But as Rublee notes, despite voluminous debate in Australia about the development of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS security partnership with the United States and United Kingdom, the “maritime domain is much more than nuclear-propelled submarines.” Instead, reflecting our adoption of a broad notion of how security should be achieved, we argue, as Rublee neatly

⁶ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australia), *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security* (Canberra, 2013).


summarizes, that “maritime spaces must be better incorporated *into* and *across* our national security thinking and policy.”

Our broad understanding of security also leads us, as Sussex notes, to “call for a regional geopolitics that encompasses human and environmental as well as geopolitical and economic considerations.” As we argue, and Rublee highlights, to address these broader security challenges Australia must focus on “regional relationship building—more than purely transactional, crisis-driven diplomacy.”

Both Teo and Sussex also highlight our rethinking of Australia’s region of strategic interest, which since its 2013 *Defence White Paper* the government has defined as the “Indo-Pacific.”⁷ As we argue in our book, the Indo-Pacific lacks a logic as a “region” and is the “strategic equivalent of a Rorschach test: for some, it reflects the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific oceans through economic interactions and key trading routes; for others, it’s merely a political construct designed to support the containment of China” (pp. 21–22). As Sussex pithily puts it, the Indo-Pacific is “neither a region nor a strategy but rather a convenient foil for Australia to legitimate particularistic strategic narratives.” Sussex and Teo note that we say less about what Australia should reprioritize in its policy settings with respect to the Indo-Pacific, or what, per Sussex, “the determining criteria for such an undertaking might be.” This was deliberate, as our book aimed to provoke debate about the assumptions that underpin Australia’s approach to security and about how Australia imagines itself and its place in the world without presupposing what the answers would be. Indeed, to start providing those answers, we advocate for the Australian government to develop a national security strategy that can survey the full range of interconnected security challenges that Australia is facing and will face and consider whether the current funding and prioritization are fit for purpose.

Rublee is intrigued by our use of the idea of “strategic imagination,” asking whether this means “thinking more broadly and creatively about foreign policy options” or has a deeper theoretical underpinning. As she points out, because our book was written for a wide audience, we avoided being too “academic.” But as Rublee and others have pressed us to describe our conceptual framework,⁸ we have settled on describing it as “pragmatic idealism.” Being idealistic means that we recognize that “reality” is always

⁷ Department of Defence (Australia), 2013 *Defence White Paper* (Canberra, 2013).

⁸ See, for example, our discussion with Darren Lim, “A Progressive Australian Foreign Policy?” Australia in the World, Podcast, June 9, 2024  <https://australiaintheworld.podbean.com/ep-131-a-progressive-australian-foreign-policy>.

partial because there is never a consensus about how things are. Instead, we argue that it is up to us—and other national security thinkers—to imagine how things can be.

Our idealism is pragmatic because we are acutely aware that Australia cannot imagine away real challenges—for example, the consequences of climate change or the likelihood of a future pandemic must be faced—but we can devise new ways of meeting those challenges. For instance, as Rublee notes, we argue for a comprehensive approach to security that includes environmental considerations “not only because it affects Torres Strait Islanders and our neighbors in the Pacific, but also because Australia’s defense readiness can be dramatically impacted by climate change.” We also look for opportunities for compromise and partnership. We are particularly keen to resist the fatalism of the current Australian national security debate, which assumes that certain security challenges evolve according to settled scripts and therefore that war between the United States (as well as its ally, Australia) and a great-power China is inevitable. As we argue in our book, “the problem with the growing tendency to frame China as Australia’s ‘enemy’ is that it closes off opportunities to think differently and, perhaps, identify areas in which cooperation might still be possible” (p. 228).

We are conscious that being “idealistic” is often dismissed as impractical, utopian, and naïve wishful thinking. But we argue that the Australian national security community needs to better articulate a politics of hope, opportunity, and possibility rather than of cynicism, passive acceptance, disengagement, and, ultimately, despair. We use the concept of imagination to frame our analysis because using our imaginations can open us up to other futures and help us to try to understand and empathize with the perspectives of other nations and peoples with which Australia’s future is intertwined.

Teo and Rublee are skeptical about whether our calls for reimagining Australia’s security will be taken up by the government. As Rublee observes, in Australia, as in most other countries, “national security communities tend to be closed; roadblocks for women and people of color are well-documented.” We agree that the diversity and inclusiveness of Australia’s national security debates needs to be enhanced. The March 2025 forum convened by Turnbull exemplified this, with, for example, only two women and one person of color being among the fourteen invited speakers. But we distinguish between the public debates—which are often populated by think tankers and academics—and the background policy discussions. We have found policymakers to be receptive to our arguments. Our book

was launched in April 2024 by Foreign Minister Penny Wong, and we have been invited to deliver lectures to hundreds of policymakers at both the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade. While this interest has not led to the wholesale adoption of our approach, we are encouraged by the willingness of policymakers to engage with our arguments, especially given that we challenge key assumptions that guide their work.

Although bipartisan consensus on the importance of the U.S.-Australia alliance remains strong, even during the tumultuous first months of Trump 2.0, there are differences in how the major Australian political parties seek to prioritize and engage with countries in Asia and the Pacific and what they are willing to invest in such relationships. The question of whether Australia should seek security from or in its region remains central. With the Australian federal election taking place in May 2025, politicians and policymakers will have an opportunity to rethink their approach to pursuing Australia's security, which in today's rapidly changing world is more urgent than ever. 