Jesse Tumblin, PhD FRHistS
Strategy & Policy Department, US Naval War College
The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views or policy of the U.S. Defense Department, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. No federal endorsement is implied or intended.

Introduction

The following distills a set of framing challenges and recommendations from a longer article published in the 2024 issue of *Australian Naval Review* on the current dilemmas facing AUKUS and their rootedness in a much deeper history spanning over a century.[1] That article emerged not just from the urgency of the strategic questions surrounding AUKUS, but from the apparent amnesia surrounding those questions, which needlessly discards the insights of thousands of predecessors who struggled with nearly the same challenges over the preceding 150 years.

History does not teach straightforward lessons or present perfect analogies,[2] but it can usefully shape strategic judgment. Some historians, following in the footsteps of strategists like Julian Corbett, Basil Liddell Hart, Michael Howard, George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and others, have recently re-emphasized the value and necessity of using history in this fashion.[3] CEW Bean, in Australia's interwar moment, argued that the Commonwealth should scrutinize its experience of the Great War to guide its approach to Second World War in the Pacific in a way that would win the subsequent peace.[4] More recently, the late RADM James Goldrick embodied the practice of using insights from the past to shape Australia's contemporary strategic challenges across a career as a practitioner and scholar.

Per the Defence Subcommittee's request, this submission will focus on the Inquiry themes of AUKUS and Australia's foreign partnerships. It will focus submission recommendations toward three major challenges currently facing the Commonwealth.

Challenge 1—Multipolarity

As in the moment preceding the First World War, the contemporary world faces a shift to multipolarity. Multipolar conditions present opportunities for middle-sized powers (and rising great powers), but also entail a great deal of risk and instability. In the early twentieth century, Germany, Japan, and the United States contested, eroded, and replaced the British-dominated unipolar moment of the long nineteenth century. British unipolarity had followed a prior era of bipolar conflict between Britain and France, another point of similarity with the sequence of

---

[1] Jesse Tumblin, "Storm Centre: AUKUS's Past and Future," *Australian Naval Review*, no. 1 (2024).
[2] Joseph Stieb, "History Has No Lessons for You: A Warning for Policymakers," *War on the Rocks*, February 6, 2024, https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/history-has-no-lessons-for-you-a-warning-for-policymakers/.
[3] Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, "Why the U.S. President Needs a Council of Historians," *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/dont-know-much-about-history/492746/; Francis J. Gavin, "Thinking Historically: A Guide for Policy," in *The Politics and Science of Prevision* (Routledge, 2020).
[4] CEW Bean, *War Aims of a Plain Australian* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1943).

Jesse Tumblin, PhD FRHistS
Strategy & Policy Department, US Naval War College
The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views or policy of the U.S. Defense Department, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. No federal endorsement is implied or intended.

present-day conditions. Britain managed the transition from its unipolar moment to multipolarity by cooperating with American ascent and gradually accepting the transformation of its colonies from clients into partners. Today, the United States faces its own transition from unipolarity as Russia and China increasingly threaten the rules-based international order. Russia has already delivered on these threats with kinetic force, and China daily verges on the same, jeopardizing a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Recommendation 1.1—Value Partners & Coalitions

Australia should recognize that coalition management is the key to successfully navigating multipolar transitions and the wars they can produce, as was the case in the Napoleonic, First- and Second World Wars. Australia played pivotal roles in the ability of western allies to successfully fight both world wars. It should do so again: AUKUS represents such an opportunity, and Australia should view AUKUS as essential to its prospects of successfully navigating this new shift to multipolarity. In the same vein, it should cultivate ties with India and Japan, and work to bring New Zealand back into its prior role of boosting the defense capacity of its greater coalition while leveraging New Zealand's diplomatic clout with smaller Pacific nations.

Recommendation 1.2—Support and Enable Pacific Pivots

Australia should expect the strategic priorities of its partners to be strained by circumstance and overstretched commitments. Britain attempted to 'pivot' to the Pacific from the 1890s through 1945, and Australians, New Zealanders, and others strongly encouraged it to do so through naval buildup and, latterly, the Singapore strategy. Emergent crises pushed Britain's strategic gaze back to Europe at every turn. Australia should view these reversions not as insincerity but as the real tendency of crisis to embroil Europe and the Middle East, as has recently been the case in Ukraine and Gaza. Australia should make the case to its allies that the Pacific contains their gravest threat, in part by standing ready to assist in that theater, and remain consistent in that message as circumstances in other theaters intervene, as they inevitably will.

Recommendation 1.3—Shift the Discourse on 'Becoming' a Sea Power

Instead of treating its naval identity as incipient and elusive the way it has for over a century, Australia should internalize the perpetual nature of 'becoming' a sea power state. It is more strategically productive to focus government and national discourse on the open-ended necessity to enhance the nation's capacity at sea than it is to serially relitigate discussion of whether the country has finally 'become' a maritime nation or sea power state. Such a framing has contributed to unrealistic expectations among the public, government, and officer class since at least the 1890s. More recently, it has contributed to the sluggish pace of 'remaking' the

Jesse Tumblin, PhD FRHistS
Strategy & Policy Department, US Naval War College
The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views or policy of the U.S. Defense Department, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. No federal endorsement is implied or intended.

RAN for the future. Sea power is a grand strategic project that never ends and so should be the discourse that shapes it.

Challenge 2—Technology

Prerequisite to making a success of AUKUS and Australia's strategic partnerships is the recognition that they entail robust technological transfer and exchange in both directions. Since its Federal moment, Australia has navigated the challenging task of building its capacity by working with partners in training, intelligence, shipbuilding, and other aspects of the defense industrial base. These efforts were productive but insufficient at crucial moments in the last 120 years at either deterring war or producing satisfactory readiness for it. Challenges to effective exchange of technology, resources, and ideas are often driven by fears that they will entail resource inefficiencies or negative-sum consequences with respect to partners. Today, AUKUS Pillar II, the Five Eyes, and other agreements offer vital opportunities to put leverage on these challenges and avoid repeating past mistakes.

Recommendation 2.1—Reframe Cost-Benefit Analyses of Cooperation

Australia should frame its cost-benefit analysis of working with the United States, United Kingdom, and other partners with this challenge in view. Working with partners to build capacity, especially when they are differently- or better-resourced, often sends alarming signals that such exchanges are not 'efficient' or sufficiently advantageous. This was the case when Australia began building its navy in partnership with the British Admiralty after Federation, and in numerous similar moments since. Efficiency and advantage, here, are relative assessments. Too often they are assessed relative to imaginary alternatives, in which warfighting capacity can be developed cheaply and autochthonously to a degree that ensures national security. Reality is far less comfortable: the costs of cooperation, deterrence, and victory are vastly preferable to the costs of isolation, conflict, and defeat respectively.

Recommendation 2.2—View Urgency and Long Time Horizons as Compatible

Australia should welcome the strain a new strategic venture presents in service of its national interests. Linking strategy to grand strategy necessarily generates pacing tension. The AUKUS agreement's collaborative effort on producing and crewing submarines is not without challenges. The best time for overcoming challenges of this type, and for completing the interminable work of developing weapons platforms and human expertise, is always ten years ago. Yet these problems began in earnest over a hundred years ago, at a moment when the new

Jesse Tumblin, PhD FRHistS
Strategy & Policy Department, US Naval War College
The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views or policy of the U.S. Defense Department, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. No federal endorsement is implied or intended.

Commonwealth began tackling the selfsame tasks. The tension between the urgent demands of the present and the long-running nature of the process is not an indication of failure, or even of systemic incoherence. It is an indication rather of the demands of linking strategy to grand strategy. Its alternative is the frenetic rearmament preceding an imminent conflict or concurrent with one, in which the strategy of urgent preparation and the grand strategy of national survival are made one by mortal danger. This is not a clarity or coherence to be desired, and it can only be forestalled by managing the tensions of short- and long-term strategic planning necessary to deter revisionists.

Challenge 3—Strategic Commitment

Prior moments in Australia's history placed the country in mutual suspicion with strategic partners over the balance of risk and reward in the event of war. Before the Statute of Westminster in 1931, Australia feared its efforts in support of an imperial coalition would be misused in pursuit of Britain's global interests. Britain feared that Australia's growing autonomy would make Australian help in an imperial war less and less certain, while the same autonomy would also make Australia capable of starting a war that would automatically embroil Britain. Today the same dynamic affects Australia and the United States. These fears were debated in both world wars, Vietnam, and the War on Terror. Among other things, these fears erode the deterrent value of the partnerships in question by blurring the signals of mutual commitment in the eyes of potential adversaries. These dynamics produced deterrence failure and defeat for the British coalition Australia supported in the Chanak Crisis of 1922 over Turkey, and in the Singapore Strategy of the interwar over Japan.

Recommendation 3.1—Clarify Aims and Means

Australia and its allies do not harbor unlimited strategic aims against the People's Republic of China that entail regime change or military domination. While they will defend their vital interests nevertheless, it follows that limited means are necessary for the task. Australia should be as clear as possible about its aims of supporting partners in the Indo-Pacific and about the means it will use to do so to maximize the deterrent value of those aims and means.

Recommendation 3.2—Commit to Mutual Security

Revisionist powers relentlessly test the trust between cooperative incumbent ones. Manipulation and influence are merely the beginning; these tests commonly emerge in the form of coercive threats. Such was the case when Imperial Germany tested Britain and France

Jesse Tumblin, PhD FRHistS
Strategy & Policy Department, US Naval War College
The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views or policy of the U.S. Defense Department, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. government. No federal endorsement is implied or intended.

over Morocco before the First World War, when Ataturk's Turkey tested Britain and its Dominions over Chanak in 1922, when Stalin tested the western allies over Greece in the late 1940s, and when Mao tested the UN over Korea in 1950. In absence of formal defensive treaty terms (which AUKUS does not currently entail), Australia's present-day strategic partnerships have the same basis in mutual trust as did the partnerships enumerated above. It should expect that trust to be vigorously tested by coercive threats, as its predecessors were. Ironclad commitment is not a guarantor of success, but none of our examples from the recent past was helped by wavering or ambiguity.

Conclusion

Effective strategic competition demands innovators who can think creatively about the technological capabilities, political possibilities, and military challenges of the future. In the twenty-first century, that demand is also matched by an enthusiastic supply of those eager to look forward. Yet the demand for mobilizing the national resource that is the past is not nearly as strong. It is no less important, however, and requires no less imagination than thinking ahead does if it is to be usefully applied to present day challenges. This submission has summarized a few ways in which Australia's past can be useful to its future.