



United States–Australia Indo–Pacific Conversation Series #2

Strengthening Regional Deterrence and Defense

featuring Ashley Townshend, Madison Estes, and David Santoro

— Key Findings —

Introduction

Pacific Forum, in cooperation with the United States Studies Centre, and with generous support from the U.S. Embassy in Canberra, organized the inaugural session of the U.S.–Australia Indo-Pacific Conversation Series. This virtual event took place on March 3, 2021 through the Zoom platform, under the theme “Strengthening Regional Deterrence and Defense”. The session was headlined by Ashley Townshend (Director of Foreign Policy and Defence at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney) and Madison Estes (Strategy and Policy Analysis program analyst with CNA in Arlington, VA), and moderated by Pacific Forum Vice President and Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation and Disarmament David Santoro. The webinar brought together some 80 participants mainly from the United States and Australia, but also from other countries in Northeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. The following are the key findings from the session.

Multiplicity of Competitors in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has attracted a multitude of powers seeking to exert geo-political influence. A host of nuclear and traditional threats, alongside asymmetric and gray zone tactics, command the attention of Washington and Canberra. China, Russia, and North Korea remain the strongest competitors to US influence in the region, with Beijing constituting Washington’s top priority. It is important for US policy-makers to remember that every actor in the Indo-Pacific can have different motivations and goals, and these must be accounted for if policies to garner influence are to be effective.

Rise of China in the Indo-Pacific

China's steady military rise and transformation of regional affairs is a primary concern in Washington. Over time, the PLA has increasingly problematized the regional security environment and regularly utilizes so-called 'gray zone' tactics to help achieve its national objectives without crossing the threshold of conflict. Today, the PLA commands considerable influence in the Western Pacific, and can incur great costs on allies looking to benefit from the region.

Challenges of Drafting Deterrence Strategies

States' conceptions of deterrence are varied, and this complicates formulating an effective strategy. For Australia, deterrence by denial, or combating the encroachment of a Chinese area of denial whereby sovereignty would be denied in a closed environment, is the prism through which Canberra's policy-makers view deterrence. This also extends to misperceptions between the US and China regarding nuclear policy, and what constitutes an act of aggression or overstepping the nuclear threshold. In the same way that Washington's lack of a no first-use nuclear policy can disquiet strategists in Beijing, China has not demonstrated an understanding of how strategies to blunten US capabilities could lead to inadvertent escalation.

US–Australia Alliance: The Need and Difficulty of Updating

The US–Australia relationship has seen enduring, strong cooperation in the Indo-Pacific over the past seventy years. Some formal mechanisms of decision making have endured from the ANZUS treaty, however these have fallen by the wayside in a strategic and practical sense. Although this has not mattered much, the US and Australia's alignment of strategic interests in maintaining a favourable balance of power constitutes the most powerful argument for updating the mechanisms and structures of alliance in the region. Expanding anti-submarine wartime capabilities from military drills to maritime peacetime operations and maritime domain awareness is one such area where Washington and Canberra's relationship could be transformed.

This document was prepared by Tom Connolly, Non-resident Vasey Fellow, Pacific Forum. For more information, please contact Ariel Stenek (ariel@pacforum.org), Director, Young Leaders Program, Pacific Forum. These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.

The United States-Australia Indo-Pacific Conversation Series is held with support from the **US Embassy in Canberra** and in collaboration with the **United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney**.

