



HOW WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY GIVES THE US AND AUSTRALIA AN EDGE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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The following is a summary of the authors' article
published in Pacific Forum's Issues & Insights. Read
the full article [here](#).

While empowering women may be a long-game strategy for retaining the edge in great power competition, it may also be one of the few remaining tools the United States and Australia have for achieving a thin margin of excellence. Great power competition has become a central issue for both Australia and the United States, due primarily to narrowing military and economic gaps on the global stage.

For Australian intelligence and security officials, the “[air-sea gap](#)” defense strategy is no longer sufficient for limiting China's influence in the Pacific. The “[Pacific Step-Up](#)” strategy calls for Australia to respond to [priorities identified by Pacific leaders](#), including climate and disaster resilience, and has been an important and helpful shift for Australia in this regard. Knowing that China cannot afford static growth or technological inferiority, American foreign policy experts recognize China's increasing economic influence in the Indo-Pacific, and have [sounded the alarm about America's shrinking economic advantage](#).

Given these realities, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a smart power tool Australia and the US could use to gain a competitive edge.

Realizing the benefits of this advantage will require full implementation of the Australian and American WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), with a particular focus on harnessing the potentials of both women and men to protect against insecurity and violence. Security and peace-making professionals need to be able to [respond to different threat scenarios](#), and the security of the whole of the community during and after crises. Women servicemembers and gender perspectives strengthen security and peacemaking responses by adding to the diversity of insights and priorities.

Research finds that “women and men with hostile attitudes towards women, and towards gender equality in general, are not just [more prone to extremist views](#) ... they are also more likely to actually support violent groups and to participate in political violence.” The WPS agenda challenges these and other gender stereotypes that undermine conflict prevention, thereby providing new pathways to peacebuilding.

In contrast to American and Australian approaches, on the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, Russia put forth a China-supported resolution that [threatened to reverse progress](#) made on preventing conflict-related sexual violence and other Women, Peace and Security matters. Further, Chinese policies reinforcing traditional women's roles, including a [ban on women from 19% of China's civil service jobs](#), have been partially responsible for creating increased competitiveness in the job market, allowing [employers to discriminate against women](#). This underutilization of human capital has [weakened China's labor market efficiency](#), causing a [drag on economic growth](#), and imposing a cost on China's economy.

Additionally, China's one-child policy resulted in sex-selective abortions and femicide, leading to a [gender imbalance in China's population](#) which has been exacerbated by the fact that more well-educated women are choosing not to have children. Today,

there are more adult men than women in China. The problem is so prominent that unmarried men are now referred to as “bare branches.” Due to their lack of family and societal ties, these men have been shown to be [more prone to crime and violence](#), a reality that threatens both China’s domestic stability as well as international security.

China is clearly not maximizing the advantages women offer to security, thereby opening the door for the US and Australia to widen the “advantage gap” in a meaningful way. Furthermore, while China has funded small-scale women’s health projects through multilateral support for the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, there exist opportunities for Australia and America to strategically invest in gender equity in the Indo-Pacific to further increase their competitiveness in the region. As former Australian [Foreign Minister Julie Bishop put it](#), “[c]ompetition is ever-present and relentless” and “[w]hile non-democracies such as China can thrive when participating in the present system, an essential pillar of our preferred order is democratic community.”

The US National Action Plan on WPS

The United States’ first WPS National Action Plan was enacted in 2010 under the Obama administration, updated in 2016, and superseded by the 2017 Women, Peace and Security Act. With [reporting requirements to Congress](#) for relevant federal agencies, the 2017 Act mandates the development of a whole-of-government WPS strategy. The United States thus has the opportunity to provide a model for other progressive countries to follow.

Whilst structural barriers are down, however, cultural barriers and biases, and [“roadblocks to gender inclusivity”](#) remain. Funding amounts have not risen substantially since the Defense Department’s initial allocation of \$4 million (from a \$1.3 trillion budget) to WPS in fiscal year 2019. Consequently, implementation has largely been dependent on individual leaders’ knowledge and command-relevant prioritization of the WPS framework.

Problematically, many American security practitioners are unaware of the basic WPS tenants,

and WPS has not been a part of core Professional Military Education. The Naval War College is gradually integrating WPS in its curriculum, yet more training opportunities for gender advisors, and their regular access to leadership, are needed. Following setbacks through COVID-19, a strong indicator that the United States is getting serious about UNSCR 1325 will be when departmental budgets are at a level to facilitate substantial implementation.

The Australian WPS NAP

The Australian Government adopted a second WPS NAP in April 2021, reaffirming Australia’s commitment and regional leadership on WPS after a lengthy delay. The 10-year plan focuses on four outcomes: supporting women’s meaningful participation and needs in peace processes; reducing sexual and gender-based violence; supporting resilience, crisis, and security, law and justice efforts to meet the needs and rights of all women and girls; and demonstrating leadership and accountability for WPS.

Under the first NAP (2012-2018), the implementation record of Defence (Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Ministry of Defence) indicated noteworthy progress: the number of women serving in the ADF increased substantially and targets are in place to achieve 25% women in the navy and air force, and 15% in the army, by 2023. Further, significant impact was achieved with regard to the [growing awareness of WPS](#) in the Indo-Pacific region, including by means of Australian support of other militaries’ WPS implementation strategies through joint exercises and capacity-building.

Indeed, the Gender, Peace and Security directorate under the Joint Capabilities Group aims to make the ADF “a world leader in implementing the military component” of the WPS action plan. For several years, Australia has run its own training [“GENAD” course](#) for [military gender advisors](#), and gender advisors have been routinely deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and South Sudan. Still, while the 2020 Defence Strategy Update mentioned the intensification of major power competition and the prospect of future inter-state conflict, human security threats and greater instability

in the Indo-Pacific, [no mention was made of WPS commitments](#).

Conclusion

Given the shifts in the global and regional security environment, including the equalizing of US and Chinese power and the range of threats to human and state security, the WPS agenda is an underappreciated asset. The contemporary leadership on WPS shown by the US and Australia, in diplomacy, development and military cooperation, needs to be built upon in the Indo-Pacific region in partnership with key allies to further strengthen efforts to promote gender-inclusive military and peacekeeping forces, and gender-responsive analysis of growing traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

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