



Women, Peace and Security: A Competitive Edge for Australia and the US in the Indo-Pacific

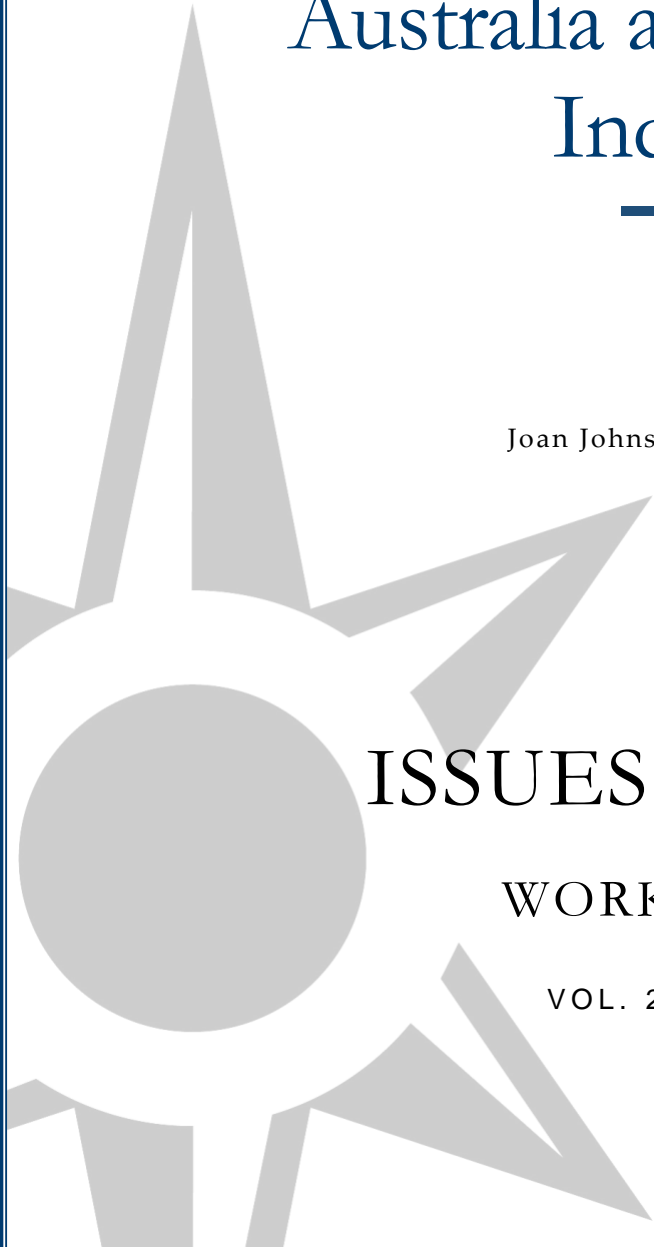
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ABSTRACT

Australia and the United States face great power competition with China due to a narrowing of gaps between them—economically and militarily—in the Indo-Pacific region. This narrowing of gaps should not be a surprise to anyone who did not expect China to be content with static growth and technological inferiority. Great power competition is actually about a rise in parity among competitors. The “edge” previously held by Australia and the United States over China has become smaller; therefore “wins” will be by very thin margins. This means Australia and the United States need to find new advantages to widen their thin margins of excellence and maintain security. This paper will discuss why the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda offers an edge, and how implementing respective national action plans for WPS and partnering widely and strongly with other Indo-Pacific countries on WPS can offer such new advantages.

Introduction

Australia and the United States face great power competition with China due to a narrowing of gaps between them—economically and militarily—in the Indo-Pacific region. In late 2019, Andrew Hastie, chair of Australia’s parliamentary intelligence and security committee, drew attention to what great power competition with China meant for Australia, noting that the reliance on the “air-sea gap” defense strategy Australia has emphasized is no longer enough. He said that strategy would need “urgent and comprehensive review, and the objective should be to consider how Australia can play a more forward and robust role in the Indo-Pacific region alongside the US and other key players.”¹ Australia’s “Pacific Step-Up” strategy (launched in 2017) to increase aid in the Pacific and better support small-island developing nations reflected an important shift, in part due to these regional security concerns.²

Similarly, focus on great power competition has transitioned as America’s top priority from the Trump to the Biden administration, again due to narrowing gaps. Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, stated in 2021 that “the gap between the United States and other countries is narrowing militarily; it has already closed by some economic measures.”³ This narrowing of gaps should not be a surprise to anyone who did not expect China to be content with static growth and technological inferiority. Great power competition is actually about a rise in parity among competitors. The “edge” previously held by Australia and the United States over China has become smaller; therefore “wins” will be by very thin margins.⁴ This means Australia and the United States need to find new advantages to widen their thin margins of excellence and maintain security. Implementing their respective national action plans for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and partnering widely and strongly with other Indo-Pacific countries on WPS can offer such new advantages.

Following UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2000, community consciousness around gender equality and the rise of women’s leadership led to a substantive focus on women, peace and security as crucial to national interest and global stability. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has promoted women’s “equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.” WPS is not a niche agenda for women; it is a security agenda that seeks to mainstream gender equality perspectives to enable governments and

¹ Stephen Kupers, “Preparing Australia for the era of great power competition and political warfare,” *Defence Connect*, February 18, 2020. <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5599-preparing-australia-for-the-era-of-great-power-competition-and-political-warfare>

² Joanna Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's strategy in the Pacific Islands*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017.

³ Emma Ashford, “U.S.-China Great Power Competition is a Recipe for Disaster,” *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/01/china-usa-great-power-competition-recipe-for-disaster/>

⁴ Nalani Tyrrell & Joan Johnson-Freese, “Getting Serious About Women, Peace & Security,” *Strategy Bridge*, April 13, 2021, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2021/4/13/getting-serious-about-women-peace-security>

people to prevent, prepare for, and/or respond to armed conflict and other crises.⁵ The advantages of the agenda are that it harnesses the potentials of both women and men to protect and prevent against insecurity and violence. Security and peace-making professionals need to be able respond to different threat scenarios – including female radicalization to violence—and the security of the whole of the community during and after crises.⁶ Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, has stated, for example, that “female peacekeepers possess better situational awareness, can provide comfortable protection of civilians from sexual and gender-based violence, and are more easily acceptable in winning the hearts and minds of the local community.”⁷ Gender perspectives integrated in security sector education, training, and exercises can also improve protection and security responses.

The WPS agenda encourages us to challenge such gender stereotypes that disempower both women and men and undermine the goal of conflict prevention. 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.”⁸ Another advantage is that WPS addresses the structural gender inequality and discriminatory gender norms that have been found to be barriers to sustainable peace in many conflict-affected and fragile contexts.⁹

Different perspectives can be particularly important in framing questions critical to strategy development. Emma Ashford suggests, for example, that engaging in a great power competition before defining critical elements is a recipe for disaster. “Unfortunately, for all that great power competition has been Washington’s favorite buzzword in recent years, it remains frustratingly poorly defined. Indeed, most commentators skip right past the big questions (such as “Why are we competing?” or “What are we competing over?”) and go straight to arguing about how to achieve victory.”¹⁰ One might have assumed that a big lesson for the United States from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the ineffectiveness of ready-shoot-aim approach, but that does not seem to be the case.

⁵ See Sara E. Davis and Jacqui True, eds. *The Oxford Handbook on Women, Peace and Security*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁶ Melissa Johnston et al 2020. *A Gender Sensitive Approach to Empowering Women for Peaceful Communities: Academic Paper*. Bangkok: UN Women <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/academic-paper-a-gender-sensitive-approach-to-empowering-women-for-peaceful-communities#view>

⁷ Retno Marsudi, “Women, peace and security and Indonesia’s foreign policy”, *The Jakarta Post*, July 7 2020 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/07/07/women-peace-and-security-and-indonesias-foreign-policy.html>; See also the Indonesian-sponsored Security Council Resolution 2538, adopted in August 2020.

⁸ E. Bjarnegård, Melander, E., and True, J., “Women, Peace and Security: The Sexism and Violence Nexus,” Joint Brief Series: New Insights on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for the Next Decade, November, 2020, Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, PRIO and UN Women. https://fba.se/contentassets/46391654ca6b4d8b995018560cb8ba8e/research_brief_bjarnegard_et_al_webb.pdf

⁹ J. True, *Gender And Conflict: Making Elite Bargaining Processes More Inclusive*. Stabilisation Unit, Her Majesty’s Government of the United Kingdom, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gender-and-conflict-making-elite-bargaining-processes-more-inclusive>

¹⁰ Ashford, 2021.

Taking advantage of the insights, perspectives, knowledge, and different communication and problem-solving skills that women—and men who adopt pro-gender equality attitudes—add to national security is particularly advantageous against patriarchal competitors. China supported a Russian challenge to the Women, Peace and Security agenda in 2020, instead positioning itself as a power supporting the traditional role of women.¹¹ Chinese women are not just hindered by cultural barriers to inclusion, but structural ones as well. Women are banned from almost 19% of China’s civil service jobs.¹² Also, according to a 2020 report by the Petersen Institute for International Economics, China’s rise as a global economic power has created such a competitive employment market that employers actually have more leeway to discriminate against women in both hiring and pay, thereby worsening gender inequality in its workforce generally. Women in China now earn on average 67% of men’s income in the cities, and 56% in the countryside compared with women in the US and Australia who make 82% and 86.6% respectively of men’s income.¹³ The report goes on to say, however, “The resulting underutilization of human capital has weakened labor market efficiency and imposed a drag on China’s economic growth.”¹⁴ China will pay an economic price for its discrimination against women that will affect its security.¹⁵

China’s one-child policy, instituted in 1978, though widely criticized for consequent human rights abuses, sex-selective abortions and femicide, resulted in a narrowing of its education gap between boys and girls. A study released in 2020 said that the one-child policy alone “accounted for about half of the additional education that women in China achieved after the policy was put in place.”¹⁶ Many educated Chinese women then put off marriage and having children. However, the one-child policy and lifestyle choices made by women resulted in a population imbalance in favor of men, many of whom were then faced with few options for marriage and families. The Chinese government refers to these men as “bare branches” and they are considered susceptible to violent and destabilizing lifestyles because

¹¹ Patricia Salas Sanchez, et al, “A backlash against the Women, Peace and Security agenda?” *The Interpreter*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/backlash-against-women-peace-and-security-agenda>

¹² “China: Female Civil Servants Face Discrimination, Harassment,” Human Rights Watch, November 8, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/08/china-female-civil-servants-face-discrimination-harassment>

¹³ Amy Qin “A prosperous China says ‘men preferred’, and women lose.” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/16/world/asia/china-women-discrimination.html>. For US gender pay gap see https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pinc/pinc-05.html#par_textimage_24. Australia, gender pay gap see <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/australias-gender-pay-gap-statistics#:~:text=The%20national%20gender%20pay%20gap,-The%20national%20gender&text=Currently%2C%20Australia's%20national%20gender%20pay,full%2Dtime%20earnings%20of%20%241%2C804.20>.

¹⁴ Eva Zhang and Tianlei Huang, “Gender discrimination at work is dragging China’s growth,” PIIE, June 16, 2020, https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/gender-discrimination-work-dragging-chinas-growth?utm_source=update-newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=piie-insider

¹⁵ See Jane Golley et al, *Inequality of Opportunity in China’s Labor Earnings: The Gender Dimension*, China and the World Economy, 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12266>; Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, London: Zed books: 2014.

¹⁶ Jeff Grabmeier, “Having fewer children reduced the education gap in China,” February 12, 2020, <https://news.osu.edu/having-fewer-children-reduced-the-education-gap-in-china/>

of fewer societal ties.¹⁷ China is clearly not maximizing the advantages women offer to security, offering an opportunity for the United States and Australia to widen the “advantage gap” in a meaningful way. Moreover, to date, Chinese foreign assistance to promote gender equality has been limited to multilateral support for the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and implementing small-scale women’s health projects.¹⁸ In a 2017 speech discussing change and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific, former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop made clear that ‘[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.’¹⁹ Chinese aid in the Indo-Pacific does not include dedicated bilateral programs to advance women’s rights. Thus, Australian and US support for WPS and gender equality-focused aid are counterpoints to China’s influence and have allowed them to position themselves as skillful regional leaders.

The US National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

It took the United States 10 years to enact a WPS national action plan (NAP), during the Obama administration in 2010, and not coincidentally while Hillary Clinton was secretary of state. The NAP was updated in 2016 but then superseded by the Women, Peace & Security Act passed on a bipartisan basis by Congress in 2017, making implementation the law of the land. The act mandates the development of a whole-of-government strategy toward increasing the participation of women in peacekeeping and security operations, as well as training for diplomats, development specialists and security personnel in support of inclusion of female negotiators, mediators and peacebuilders around the world, with reporting requirements from relevant federal agencies to Congress to assure accountability.²⁰ The national strategy was delivered to Congress in 2019 and federal agencies began working on implementation plans. Through the 2017 act and subsequent strategies and action plans, the United States has the opportunity to provide a model for other progressive countries to follow in terms of bringing more women into security communities and take advantage of margins of excellence they can offer. Structurally, the barriers are not just down, but supportive structures have been built. Culturally, however, barriers remain.

According to a 2018 study by the New America Foundation based on interviews with security practitioners, “The State Department makes 18 mentions of ‘women’ and nine of ‘gender’ in its 62-page [Joint Strategic Plan 2018-2022, with U.S. Agency for International Development] report. The Department of Defense’s [Business Operations Plan] for [Fiscal Year] 2018-2022 makes no mention of ‘women’ or ‘gender’ in its 38-page report.” The New America Foundation report goes on to say, “Across agencies and administrations, nearly all

¹⁷ See Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

¹⁸ See UN Women. 2016. ‘China Pledges USD 10 Million Commitment to UN Women, Assistance for Other Developing Countries to Build 100 Health Projects for Women and Children.’

¹⁹ Julie Bishop, “Human Rights Council Campaign Launch.” Minister for Foreign Affairs Speech, 18 May, 2017.

²⁰ Rachel Vogelstein and Jamille Bigio, “Three Things to Know: The Women Peace and Security Act of 2017,” Council on Foreign Relations, October 13, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/three-things-know-women-peace-and-security-act-2017>

our interviewees saw most roadblocks to gender inclusivity emanating from two sources: The Department of Defense or from interagency rivalries.” Defense Department roadblocks stem from the same kind of cultural biases that kept women from many combat positions in the past.²¹ The Defense Department funded Women, Peace and Security for the first time in fiscal year 2019; \$4 million of a \$1.3 trillion budget. Funding amounts have not risen substantially since then. Consequently, implementation within the US military and abroad has largely been dependent on individual leaders’ knowledge and prioritization of the WPS agenda as relevant to their command. AFRICOM and SOUTHCOM, for example, have been admirably supportive in programs intended to address gender equality and accompanying stability issues in the region. Extending that support to INDOPACOM offers considerable benefits.

Part of the problem with implementation is simple awareness: You cannot implement what you do not know about and a significant number of American security practitioners are unaware of the basic Women, Peace and Security (WPS) tenants and links to security. WPS has not been a part of core professional military education and until it is—and on more than a one-and-done reading or lecture—military professionals will continue to rise in the ranks unaware. The Naval War College is moving toward an integrated approach to Women, Peace and Security in its curriculum, a much-needed move forward. Further, there must be more training opportunities available for gender advisors, responsible for incorporating gendered perspectives into policy and plans, and these advisors must have regular access to leadership.

As in other areas, COVID-19 delayed, cancelled, or moved scheduled Women, Peace and Security planning meetings online in 2020 and early 2021, with addressing the pandemic taking focus from other areas, especially relatively new areas of attention. Hopefully, that will change in the near future. And finally, a strong indicator that the United States is getting serious about UNSCR 1325 will be when it is budgeted within departments at a level where serious implementation can occur.

The Australian National Action Plan

After a lengthy delay, the Australian government adopted a second national action plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2021-2031 in April 2021. The previous (and first) NAP ended in 2018. The new plan promotes gender equality, protects the human rights of women and girls, and secures their full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and security processes. It reaffirms Australia’s commitment and regional leadership on WPS, focused on four outcomes over the 10-year period: supporting women’s meaningful participation and needs in peace processes; reducing sexual and gender-based violence; supporting resilience, crisis, and security, as well as law and justice efforts to meet the needs

²¹Heather Hurlburt, Elizabeth Weingarten, Elena Souris, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Gender*, New America Foundation, December 11, 2018. <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/national-security-what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-gender/>, cited in Joan Johnson-Freese and Andrea Goldstein, “Women, Peace & Security at 20,” *Strategy Bridge*, April 28, 2020. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/4/28/women-peace-and-security-at-twenty>

and rights of all women and girls; and demonstrating leadership and accountability for WPS. The plan is deliberately drilled down as the lead agencies—Foreign Affairs & Trade, Defence (encompassing the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Ministry of Defence) and Home Affairs—are expected to develop detailed plans that set targets, goals, and budgets to meet outcomes. This is where the rubber meets the road for Women, Peace and Security, but these implementation plans have yet to be made public. If Defence’s record of implementation under the first NAP (2012-2018) is any indication, we can expect these plans to drive 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. By contrast with the US, WPS has been part of the core training in the Australian Defence for some time. It is seen as crucial to improve military capability and operational effectiveness in all theaters. 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 Women, Peace and Security action plan by mainstreaming a gender perspective across all military operations. During the implementation of Australia’s first NAP,²² significant impact was achieved with regard to the growing awareness of WPS in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia supported the development of WPS implementation strategies in other militaries through joint exercises and capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific region. But the evaluation of the implementation of the plan called for a “strong whole of Defence coordinated approach to WPS in international engagement.”²³

For a number of years Australia has also run its own bespoke training “GENAD” course for military gender advisors to support policy development, and the planning and conduct of operations or exercises.²⁴ Gender advisors have been routinely deployed on international operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and South Sudan and there are more than 12 full-time positions in Defence today. These advisors are tasked with analyzing the root causes of instability in conflict, post-conflict, peacekeeping, or relief and recovery operations, and considering how “resources can be more effectively used to promote the long-term stability of that area, with an emphasis on women.”²⁵ However, while the 2020 Defence Strategy Update mentioned the intensification of major power competition and prospects for future inter-state conflict in the Indo-Pacific, as well as threats to human security resulting in greater instability and the need to be better prepared, no mention was made of WPS commitments, indicating the lack of full integration of the agenda.²⁶ It is significant,

²² Jennifer Wittwer, Mainstreaming WPS in the Armed Forces: The Case of Australia.” In Sara E. Davis and Jacqui True, eds. *The Oxford Handbook on Women, Peace and Security*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019: 569-581.

²³ Australian Government, *Defence Implementation of WPS, 2012-2018 Local Action, Global Impact*, Canberra, ACT, 2019: 91.

²⁴ See https://defence.gov.au/ADC/adfc/POTC/Gender_Adviser.asp; Listen to the discussion on the role of gender advisors in the ADF here <https://www.aspi.org.au/news/gender-advisors-adf-and-un-resolution-1325>.

²⁵ Stacey Porter, “Shaping operational outcomes: views from an ADF gender advisor,” *The Strategist*, 1 April, 2019 <https://www.aspi.org.au/shaping-operational-outcomes-views-from-an-adf-gender-adviser/>

²⁶ Australian Government, *Defence Strategic Update 2020*, Canberra, ACT, <https://www1.defence.gov.au/strategy-policy/strategic-update-2020>

however, that the Defence Force organized a 2020 conference for its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including the US, precisely focused on “closing gaps” in WPS implementation. The conference had to be cancelled, unfortunately, due to the COVID pandemic.

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—not least of all the pandemic and climate change—the Women, Peace and Security agenda is an underappreciated asset. WPS is both a thin margin of excellence to sustain peace and security in the region, and an inclusive agenda for bolstering capabilities and harnessing all the intelligence and skills needed to prevent and respond to instability and crisis. The US and Australia have shown considerable leadership on WPS in recent years in diplomacy, development, and military cooperation. Such leadership now needs to be built upon in the Indo-Pacific region in partnership with key allies and their efforts to promote gender-inclusive military and peacekeeping forces and gender-responsive analysis of growing traditional, as well as non-traditional, security challenges.

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