Australia's Diversifying Security

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Debate rumbles on in Australia about whether the country is European or Asian.

Since assuming office, Anthony Albanese and his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, have been busy reviving and reinforcing Australia's regional ties. There is work to do.

Their initiatives build on the 2018 "Pacific Step-Up" policy, aimed at guaranteeing regional security through cooperation with Australia's Pacific Island neighbours. A sound idea in itself, it is especially so in view of apparent American indifference and the growing influence of China in the region, of which the announcement of the 2022 Sino-Solomon Islands security accord is but a recent episode.

Since Europeans first settled in Australia in the late eighteenth century, they have felt isolated in a very Asian-Melanesian neighbourhood. Reflexively, they sought the reassurance of a powerful ally. Britain, her "Mother Country", was the obvious first choice, but when Mother abandoned her after the fall of Singapore in 1942, Australia turned to the United States.

In 2021, the U.S. tightened its grip with the AUKUS submarine accord. Of clear value to the U.S. and Britain; it is less so for Australia, and even less since the return to power in 2024 of President Trump, openly dismissive of America's alliance obligations. With good reason, Australia again fears abandonment. What to do?

With the arguments against relying exclusively on a single ally clearer than ever, two possibilities remain - apart from the impossible one of trying to defend the island-continent unaided. The first is to do what Prime Minister Albanese is doing: build a zone of friendship and cooperation among the island states that are Australia's nearest neighbours, a sort of buffer-zone to impede, or at least dilute, China's expanding influence.

Australia and her Pacific-Island neighbours have much to offer each other, economically, diplomatically and security-wise. For smaller Pacific Island states, Australia can help with technological expertise and infrastructure development, policing and police training, as well as defence cooperation and visas for their citizens to live, study and work in Australia. The Australian government has so far penned at least five significant accords, with Papua-New Guinea (PNG), Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Nauru and Tuvalu, also accept irregular migrants who cannot be settled in Australia. There is talk of "an arc of Melanesian stability".

That the accords are taken seriously is demonstrated by the Chinese reaction to the Pukpuk treaty with PNG, expressing "concern" at what she sees as another attempt to impede her influence in the Pacific.

Nevertheless, the Australian charm offensive is encountering some issues, as Pierre-Christophe Pantz and Gilles Pestana, both at the University of New Caledonia, describe in their mid-November article published in Grand Continent.

A statement by the Indonesian government, that it believes that all types of cooperation must contribute to peace and stability in the region, and expects both Australia and PNG to respect countries' sovereignty, hints at what worries some Pacific Island states. First, they remember Australia's colonial past, when she regarded her smaller neighbours as almost-dependencies in an exclusive zone of influence, rather than as equal sovereign partners. That may or may not have changed much, but other concerns also weigh on their minds.

First, Australia, heavily dependent on Chinese trade and investment, can go only so far in countering China's expansion or coercion in the region. How far would Australia jeopardise her own prosperity to protect the interests of small island states? It's a fair question.

Then there is AUKUS and the enormous financial commitments it demands of Australia. Surely that must limit the resources available to honour security agreements with Pacific Island states? Within AUKUS, Australia is a valuable, but unambiguously junior partner to the United States and Britain, who may themselves prove unreliable allies, as Britain did in 1942 and again in 1973.

Clearly, Australia has a credibility issue in the Pacific. What can she do to reassure those prospective allies? The second possibility evoked by Messers Pantz and Pestana is to engage a yet more diverse choice of partners, in particular, with regional mid-level powers, such as France and Indonesia.

France, Australia and Indonesia have, respectively, the largest, third and sixth largest EEZ in the world, together accounting for nearly 26 million square kilometres, or seven per cent of the world total. In the Indian and Pacific oceans alone, their combined EEZ is nearly 24 million square kilometres. For comparison, the United States Indo-Pacific EEZ is 10.4 million square kilometres.

Bilateral accords between Australia, France and Indonesia, all with obvious stakes in the region would be inherently more balanced than Australia's pairing with the United States.

Australia's central position, facing both the Pacific and Indian oceans, and her vast reserves of critical minerals, render her a valuable strategic partner for France; which in turn, offers military might, advanced technology and access to European markets for Australian produce.

With Indonesia and Australia guarding each other's northern and southern flanks, some kind of security agreement is a no-brainer, if not a strategic imperative. The two countries already enjoy strong trade ties, with Australia a major supplier to Indonesia of agricultural products, minerals and energy; and a buyer of electronic equipment, fuels and fertiliser, among other products. And while Indonesia's membership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) precludes formal security alliances, she is free to form security partnerships with other mid-level powers. Indeed, in November, 2025, Anthony Albanese and President Prabowo Subianto of Indonesia mooted a treaty aimed at deeper strategic trust and consultations, while

stopping short of formal defence obligations. Indonesia also participates in important multi-lateral organisations, such as ASEAN.

France, a key European Union member, may seem to many Australians a less obvious security partner for Australia, and has her own credibility issues: Pacific Island states remember French nuclear tests in their backyards in the 1990s, for example. But on closer inspection, with her extensive interests in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, her potential becomes clearer. Importantly, among European powers, France has experience implementing what she calls her “hedgehog” strategy, which rests on the ability, not necessarily to match the military might of an aggressor, but, partly thanks to her nuclear deterrence, to render the cost of aggression unacceptably high. In that, it resembles the “echidna” strategy advanced by some scholars in Australia.

Australian links to Asia go back a long way, at least as early as the seventeenth century, when Chinese mariners engaged Australians in cash-cropping. In 1971, before Henry Kissinger’s celebrated overtures, Australian Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam visited Beijing and established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, clearly marking Australia’s place as an Asian mid-power.

The trick now will be to reinforce the “arc of Melanesian security”, by genuinely respecting smaller Pacific Island states as equal partners, and Australia as a mid-power in partnership with other mid-powers.

Australia’s history-geography ambiguity has not gone away: indeed, her almost-unique - with New Zealand - European-Asian-Melanesian hybrid identity can be a strength. Is she ready to recognise her capacity for independent security?

Killic, R., - Australia's New Top Bilateral Defence Priority - Upgrading the Australia-Indonesia Common Treaty - AIIA - 251127

https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/11/19/entre-laustralie-et-la-chine-la-bataille-pour-les-iles-du-pacifique-x/

https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/indonesia/indonesia-country-brief

https://www.amazon.com/Echidna-Strategy-Australias-Search-Power/dp/1760643688

Footnote?
December, 2024 Solomon Islands for A$190 millions for modernisation of port infrastructure and police training, with enhanced defence cooperation, as well as Australian visa quotas for Solomon Islanders. This follows the RAMSI mission, where Australia helped re-establish internal security following a nascent civil was in 2003-2017.

Also in December, 2024, a security accord with Nauru gives Australia early information about future security partnerships entered into by the micro-state. In 2025, a first accord aimed at controlling unofficial migration to Australia envisages economic aid to the island in exchange for its accepting migrants who cannot be settled in Australia.

The Falepili (mutual help in Tuvalu) union, a similar accord was signed with Tuvalu between 2023 and 2024, which also includes significant clauses regarding security and defence. As well as assistance in the event of crises and critical infrastructure protection.

A security accord dubbed Nakanal was signed in August, 2025, with Vanuatu and is awaiting ratification. It aims at reinforced maritime cooperation, including joint surveillance of exclusive economic zones, joint military exercises and exchange of security intelligence regarding fishing and maritime traffic.

Sam Reggeveen, in his book, The Echidna Strategy, goes so far as to wonder if the United States may even retreat from the Western and Southern Pacific.