



FACULTY OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**AUSTRALIA'S MIDDLE POWER ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:
NAVIGATING BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA.**

Author: Elena Portilla Torres.

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Tutor: Manuel Alberdi.

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Abstract

This paper analyses what a middle power is and how Australia acts as one vis-à-vis great power competition between China and the United States of America. It begins with an introduction that sets up the stage of what the Indo-Pacific is as well as what a middle power is. Particular attention is paid to the relations that Australia has with the aforementioned great powers given the importance that they have not only in the region but also in Australia's domestic interests. The two main areas that link Australia with these two nations are: economic interests pertaining to China and military/security ones in relation to the U.S. The need to strike the adequate balance between the two is paramount and is not short of great challenges. Finally, this paper addresses the multiple relations that Australia is building to become more self-reliant and a leader in the region amidst the chaos.

Key words: Alliances, security, balance, rivalry, great-powers, AUKUS (trilateral security and technology partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States), the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and SDP (Australia and EU Security and Defense Partnership).

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado aborda a Australia como poder intermedio entre las dos grandes potencias del momento que son China y los Estados Unidos de América. Se parte de una introducción en la que se pone en contexto sobre lo que es la región del Indo-Pacífico así como lo que se entiende por poder intermedio. Se ha prestado especial atención a las relaciones que Australia tiene tanto con China como con los Estados Unidos dada la importancia que ambos tienen no solo en la región sino también en la política doméstica australiana. Las dos áreas principales que unen a Australia con estas dos naciones son: los intereses económicos en relación con China y los intereses militares y de seguridad en relación con los Estados Unidos. La necesidad de llegar a un equilibrio favorable en el abordaje de estos intereses con países que son rivales entre sí es clave para

Australia. Finalmente, este trabajo busca también las otras Finalmente, este trabajo busca también las otras relaciones relevantes que el país está construyendo para ser más independiente y potencialmente convertirse en el líder de la región frente al caos existente.

Palabras clave: Alianzas, seguridad, equilibrio, rivalidad, grandes potencias, AUKUS (Asociación trilateral de seguridad y tecnología entre Australia, el Reino Unido y los Estados Unidos), el Quad (el Diálogo de Seguridad Cuadrilateral), ANZUS (Tratado de Seguridad entre Australia, Nueva Zelanda y los Estados Unidos), ASEAN (Asociación de Naciones del Sudeste Asiático) y la APSD (Asociación de Seguridad y Defensa entre Australia y la Unión Europea).

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I MOTIVATIONS AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

I.I MOTIVATIONS

This paper tries to explain Australia's role as a middle power navigating its relations with China and the United States. The topic at hand, has been chosen due to academic and also personal interest.

The Indo-Pacific has gained significant importance over the past few years since it has become one of the most contested regions in the world due to Chinese territorial ambitions. The great power competition and the lack of media attention it was receiving in Europe drove me to want to know more.

Australia has always fascinated me as a unique case study. Having been studying my degree while great-powers competition was on the rise led me to ask how Australia was doing it to not only survive but also thrive under constant security threats.

Academically, it was a great opportunity to do a deeper dive on recent alliances that have made a lot of noise in the news such as AUKUS. It also drove me to want to further understand each of the actors in the region and their perspectives.

Furthermore, Australia presents a very interesting puzzle when it comes to the management of its economic interests with China, its military alliances with the United States and the mini-alliances made with other regional powers that enhance its position in the Indo-Pacific.

All in all, this area of study has sparked a lot of curiosity in me and has been exacerbated by my time spent in the country where I was able to experience in person the enormous cultural diversity that exists within the country and how important it is to them to keep growing and prospering as a nation while also being able to defend their borders and interests against great-power rivalries that directly affect it.

I.II ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

- What is a middle power and why is Australia considered one?.

- What are the key elements of the Indo-Pacific, particularly in regards to Australia?.
- What are the Australia-China relations like? And, what is the economic impact that Chinese actions have on Australia?.
- What would happen if China invaded Taiwan?. How would this affect Australia?.
- What are Australia-United States alliances like?. Do they further show how Australia can act as a middle power or do they reveal that Australia is actually more than that and can become a regional power?.
- As India is on the rise, can it be a potent ally for Australia?. Has there been an improvement in their relationship? And if so, how?.
- Although they are geographically far away from each other, is there any close relation between Australia and the European Union?. Since Europe has also turned its focus towards defense in the past few years, can it help Australia navigate the turbulent waters it finds itself in?.
- What are the next steps for Australia? Can it be neutral should a war in the region erupt?.
- Should Australia be more self-reliant?.
- Is Australia truly a middle power anymore?. Should it remain as one or should it rise to its potential as a regional power?.

II INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

II.I INTRODUCTION

Australia, finds itself in the middle of the Indo-Pacific rivalry. It is because of its geography that it is at the crux of this matter, on the one hand we find its alliance with the United States and on the other we find profound economic ties with China which render Australia the name of “middle power”.

As Canberra seeks to survive in this tug of war, we are being witnesses of an ongoing change of the security paradigm and a very volatile international stage. This, summed to the fact that economic uncertainty is ramping and global tensions are gravely impacting the markets.

Given this scenario, it is pertinent to frame what the Indo-Pacific is and its relevance. The region known as the Indo-Pacific has soon become one of the most important areas for both economic and strategic matters. It is composed of forty nations which is an indicator of just how complex relations within the region can be.

Australia, is “the middle man” between two major super powers. As stated before, one of them is the United States and the other is China. Being in the middle of two rival powers is what is going to make the dynamics between these three players all the more convoluted.

The aim of this paper is to examine how Australia has adopted this middle power role and how both security and economics are the two key motivators in all of the region.

The ways in which Australia fights back the tensions in the region through diplomatic, military and economic means will also be analyzed. As well as an in depth analysis of its relations with China and the United States of America. Australia’s relations with other countries such as the members of ASEAN, India and the European Union will also be studied.

This very delicate balancing act to which Australia is subject to, will require all of its might not to crumble and cause havoc in the region. This analysis will be made by first outlining what a middle power is, the power dynamics at play, alliances like the Quad and the role of economics. Further on, Australia’s relations with China and the United States will be studied in detail focusing on important alliances such as AUKUS in the case of the U.S. and the important trade ties with China. This will be followed by a broader look at Australia’s relations with ASEAN countries, India and the EU.

II.II METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this paper is a qualitative approach focused on a single study method for each relevant country. Australia is studied as a state whose geographical, geopolitical and economic interests as a middle power, reveal a tangled web of alliances and rivalries. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to approach matters through an analytical and descriptive lens.

The question of how a middle power acts under the pressure and competitiveness of two super-powers stems from wanting to understand how Australia positions itself and why it is shifting its position in certain areas while remaining firm in others. Therefore, policy,

diplomacy, defense documents and military actions are documented to interpret and further understand the choices made. The analysis aims to contextualize the relation with each country that is mentioned as well as an explanation of the state's rationale for their decision making. Significant alliances such as AUKUS and the Quad are looked at to exemplify how Australia acts in conjunction with other relevant countries to ensure security within the region. This allows for the theoretical framework to be broadened and determine more precisely what Australia's aims are.

The understanding of this framework comes from the existing literature on middle powers and how Australia may have steered away from the traditional meaning of the concept. Sources of information used are intentionally varied due to the complexity of the subject and the abundance of opinions on it. Academic papers are used to better understand the context of the region, however, to have a thorough understanding of present circumstances, peer-reviewed articles that report on the most recent events are analyzed to get an up to date version of events. Further to the point, government documents particularly those referring to defense and foreign affairs are implemented to support arguments made. Regional think tanks alongside expert round tables and policy expert podcasts provide a view into what professional analysts and officials hone onto as the main elements of the strategic discourse.

For their part, it is acknowledged that think tank and government funded resources may contain analytical biases as a byproduct of their patronage. As for podcasts and roundtables, they are not assumed to be free of the same problematics as well as a certain degree of speculation. Hence why, these sources are used as a framework of how the debate is being conducted by experts.

The writing procedure is based on a previous deep dive on the topic at hand, context on the countries being studied in relation to Australia and an account of the most important elements of their relation. The limitations that may be found are that where opinion is given, it is not as irrefutable truth but rather just as personal insight into the findings. It is also important to keep in mind that research pertaining to the region is ongoing and therefore, it is possible that some aspects become subject to change.

III INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES THAT FRAME THE PROBLEMATIC

Australia finds itself trapped between China and the United States. However, this entrapment is not due to its geographical nature or at least, not entirely. It is caused by Australia's economic and defense interests that bifurcate between these two great-powers.

Before getting into a more in depth analysis of Australia's role in the region and the different players involved, it is pertinent that the different theories through which this question is usually dealt with are mentioned.

Realism, is one of the theories that is most predominant. It emphasizes the importance of power play and determines that Australia should remain allied with the U.S. to combat China's pressures and rampant economic growth. Under realism, the ANZUS, AUKUS and the Quad alliance should be bolstered. Whereas liberalism, signals towards the importance of participating in international forums such as WTO (World Trade Organization), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) to drive cooperation and a multilateral approach where dialogue is the bastion of all decision making. Liberalism also places significant importance on commerce since its viewed as the basis of liberal economic principles. Contrary to these two theories, constructivism hones in on identity and shared values. Australia is a democracy that fosters the rules based order. Constructivists advocate for the Indo-Pacific to be an identity more so than just a mere region denominator or common interest signifier.

To have a better understanding of the theories at play, it is important to give some context. In 2014, the Force Posture Agreement between U.S. and Australia translated into the deployment of American marines in the Northern Territory of Darwin. In 2017, the Quad signing took place in Manila, the Philippines and just a year before, in 2016, Australia made public its Defense White Paper where the Indo-Pacific term was made reference to. In 2020 a meeting where all the defense leaders met happened virtually due to COVID-19 worldwide pandemic limitations. Further on, on September 15th 2021 the AUKUS alliance was formally announced. It was a pivotal moment since this was a massive agreement that included cooperation to have nuclear submarines as well as developing

other areas pertaining to intelligence by all three members, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States working together. It was as recently as 2022 that AUKUS Pillar one was created to accelerate the nuclear submarine program.

Having laid out this brief and succinct context to set the scene, it is worth analyzing in a bit more depth how each theory views the main thesis of this paper since it will provide a foundational framework to understand how matters in the region are perceived, and thus how different arguments are made.

Through realism, Australian policy choices can be explained through an anarchic understanding of the international system. Realist authors like Morgenthau and Waltz claim that states have a tendency to act based on external threats. Through the 2014 joint military activities and Through the 2014 joint military activities and the 2021 AUKUS agreement that included the U.S. could be treated as empirical evidence that Canberra seeks a stronger military alliance with the United States given the threat that China poses. Back in 2010, the realist author John Mearsheimer accurately predicted that it would be a “Gathering Storm”, as he framed it, where Australia and other countries of the region would want to get closer to the U.S., especially in military matters. Yet again, reality confirms his predictions. (Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019, June). *The gathering storm: China’s challenge to US power in Asia.*).

For realism, security alliances come before economic ones since the Chinese military rise is regarded as the bigger threat. Canberra showcased this attitude when they denounced the 2020 Chinese territorial demands over the South China Sea. Following the dissuasion technique that realists believe that states make use of, Australia since entering AUKUS has upped its military budget and has potentiated the building of submarines that are nuclear powered.

Nevertheless, what seems like a perfect prediction of events from realism, fails to answer the why behind it all. It also underestimates the potential negative economic impact that can be suffered from standing up to China. It goes without saying that Chinese tentacles go far beyond the military realm.

Internal motivations and the importance of the rules based order are better explained by the liberal theoretical paradigm. Keohane and Moravcsik are two of the most well known defenders of the liberal perspective. The rule of law and institutions are the keys to cooperations. Opening Australia to new markets through cooperation and mutual

agreements that ensure interdependency and thus, stability. (Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.).

Liberal perspectives determine that democracies should never recur to war to solve their issues. Under this prism, Australia must have a collaborative attitude towards other democracies which are alike and come together with countries such as Japan, the U.S. and the UK. Other non-democratic countries can be beneficial alliances but should not be the main focal point. These non-democratic countries should be contained and treated with caution, making sure that there is always an adherence to the rules based order.

Liberals also value the importance of international institutions. This would make them urge Australia to actively participate in forums that are in favor of free commerce within the region. Such institutions are the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) established in 2015 of which Australia was one of the founding members. (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (s.f.). *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*.). It is also part of the Quad alliance centered in regional security and development. Australia also defends a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) which is a clear liberal based stance.

It is to be expected that the more liberal sectors of analysts and policy makers are to be critical of the AUKUS alliance since it is heavily militarily oriented that strays away from traditional diplomatic negotiations. This military tone comes at an economic cost from China that does not see in a positive light this alliance, it registers it as a threat towards its expansionist interests.

This is where constructivism comes in because taking in the anarchic international state of the realists and the institutionalization of the liberals, the constructivist perspective offers an alternative to both by claiming that “anarchy is what States make of it”(Wendt, 1992) Wendt, A. (1992). *Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425). Australia’s actions show how it perceives itself. Ideals conform their foreign policy and the sustainment of the rules based order, making them promoters of ideas that uphold regional status quo and who seek to improve it.

The creation of a common regional identity will be fostered by those who believe that Australia should have a more humanitarian and values based diplomacy that create

cultural ties with democracies. Those who adhere to this theory will revert away from Australia becoming a regional power and will much prefer for it to remain a middle power. The limits of constructivism are usually unclear since values can be a very ample concept that can change and take different forms over time.

All of these theories, particularly realism and liberalism, will be seen at play throughout the analysis of Australia as a middle power. These two theories are extremely intertwined in the study of this region since Australia is at a crossroads between China and the United States. It is faced to delicately and most importantly, strategically strike a balance that is positive for them in the two primordial areas of the nation: economics and defense/security. Each theory will cross paths and enables a thorough understanding of a region that, as it will be detailed in on coming chapters, is of a high degree of complexity due to the multiple actors involved and hence, the converging and clashing interests.

IV MIDDLE POWER CONCEPT

Australia is not a super power. This is not a pejorative outlook but rather an acknowledgement of what former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans claimed Australia to be within the international relations landscape; “What defines Australia as a middle power are three aspects: what it is not, what it is and its mindset in international relations”.

This comes to show how Australia, admits not being in a role of dominance but it is not deterred by it in the least. While its counterparts, China and the United States, are both great powers within the global landscape, Australia is granted the role of middle power.

This role that it has been given, favors Australia since it converts it into the principal cooperater and negotiator within the region. Therefore, Australia is obliged to work in concert with other actors within the region ,forming long lasting alliances. These alliances can be made with already existing like-minded powers or with adversaries that due to certain interests it is seen as profitable to engage with them. (Harijanto, C. (2024). Middle-power behaviors: Australia’s status-quoist/Lockean and Indonesia’s reformist/Kantian approaches to crises of legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 78(1), 40–57.).

As a middle power, upholding the international order and sustaining basic international principles is of utmost importance. Australia, stands by the international order and is part of numerous treaties that advocate for basic human rights to be upheld.

Therefore, Australia being a middle power, grants it a lot more leverage than what one would initially expect. It is a highly strategic pawn on the Indo-Pacific chess board and has a vital role to play. It is through the exertion of regional influence that Australia is affirming its place.

As of sorts, Australia is an “agent of stability” as per described within the Balochistan think tank report (Iqbal, S., & Khan, M. (2025). *Navigating Power Dynamics: Middle Powers and their Role in Asia-Pacific Rivalry. BTTN Journal.*). It is entrusted with having the collective interests prevail and not giving a free pass to the hegemonic desires for power and common disregard for the international rule of law that some other countries with interests in the region showcase.

Within the journal aforementioned, there is a four tier breakdown of what are deemed to be the main roles of middle powers such as Australia. The first module would be a functional one in which the international theory that is applied is liberalism. Under this module, the middle power is entrusted with peacekeeping matters. To put it bluntly, it is commanded to “hold the line” so to speak and not let the spark that would lead to the hecatomb ignite. The mediation through multilateral institutions is the predominant route.

On a separate category, there is the behavioral aspect. As a way of explaining this concept promptly, one can look at South Korea. They have set an example of civics and control through their identity as a nation. This notion marries up with constructivism which outlines the role of a middle power more so as a qualitative example to its counter parts.

The hierarchical approach is that which is measured by quantitative aspects such as GDP growth, the capacity of its military, the geographical positioning of the country etc. This notion of middle power is greatly associated with realism and it is the one that best describes what Australia embodies now.

Finally, there is the rhetorical vision that is based on the qualitative aspect. Narrative plays a pivotal role and is one of the hallmarks of its autonomy and defense patterns. It is a

middle power that hones in on sovereign integrity and discourse centered around its autonomy.

All of these middle power viewpoints, depict the importance of the middle power role.

To add weight to this role, it is also worth mentioning that up to one third of the world cargo goes through the Indo-Pacific and more than two thirds of the oil exports (given the recent events in Iran and Venezuela, this holds even more importance). With middle powers such as Australia on the map, the competition is diluted away from the traditional game players. It is an intricate interweb of powers, interests and threats that give this role a whole new weight within the actual paradigm of geopolitics.

V THE POWER STRUCTURE AT PLAY

Both super powers involved in the Indo-Pacific; the United States of America and China, have been developing commercial strategies to further their interests in the region. From Chinas part, there is the Belt and Road Initiative which is used to help propel its influence through infrastructure and roads of international commerce. Conversely, the United States, advocates for an initiative called the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) which has as its main focus the defense of the liberal order to reign in the region. The clash of interests between these two nations gives place to what is often described as “strategic vulnerability”. This is due to the fact that having two powers that both pull towards furthering their own interests, creates inevitable tension and sets the ground for volatility which implicitly equates to security becoming a focal point of concern.

China is described by experts as “revisionist” which entails that it challenges the rules that were once the compass that guided actions in the region. While on the other hand the United States is seen as a supporter of the preexisting order.

Australia perceives these interests as potential destabilizers in the region. Certain precedents, give way to this thought process. In 2012, the Senkaku Islands were nationalized and in 2017 after the THAAD missile system was deployed by South Korea the security alarms in the region went up.

Further to this point, Australia sees its role as a middle power become all the more important due to the recent rhetorical changes coming from the United States. The United States, has publicly declared numerous times its desire to “pivot to Asia”. Not only that

but it has carried out hand in paper actions such as the signing of AUKUS which Australia is part of. AUKUS, consists of an alliance formed by Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to support each other with nuclear-powered submarines to face the changes in the region that predominantly affect maritime security and sovereignty.

Outside from the military preparation, the diplomatic channels have also gained notable importance. In Vanuatu, Tonga, the Maldives, India and the Solomon islands embassies and consulates have been opened. These are potent symbols of the more “silent” ties that are being made that can drive the region to long-lasting change as well as new durable alliances.

VI QUAD MIDDLE POWERS

Quad stands for “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” and it is an alliance which its main focus is to promote the order that is based on international law. Its members are : the United States, Australia, India and Japan. They “complicate” the entrance of any of these hegemony into the region so that the Quad members can still be leaders of their own sovereignty and not have it be contested by any of these powers. (Asia Society Policy Institute. (n.d.). *The Quad: Strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. Asia Society.).

Each country that conforms the Quad, to the exception of the United States, is considered a middle power as per the meaning given to this term above. In a close look at how these three middle powers are acting, one can see the different approaches that are being taken to tackle the same problematic.

Australia has taken an approach akin to what the realist theory envisions a nation doing amidst external direct and indirect threats, which is increasing its defense spending. It is estimated that by 2033, Australia will be spending up to 2.3% of its GDP in defense. Not only that, but it has only signed a missile deal of two billion dollars that will supply them with an arsenal of F-35 and F-18 planes.

Contrary to Australia, Japan is taking a more liberal route. Japan has opted to increase investment as they set out in the “Tokyo Strategy 2018”. They aim to provide support and “high-quality investment” within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative in order to counter the Chinese strategy.

India, is the third middle power of this triad and has adopted what is known as the “Act East policy”. It is a strategy that is not here nor there, it is equidistant in a way. It keeps the United States content by abiding and advocating for the rules based order while also not being excessively reticent towards China so that the latter does not see India as an adversary. It is to be taken into consideration that India is a country on the rise, it is notably part of the BRICS (members are: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia) alliance that wants to part ways with the U.S. dollar and an alliance that China is also part of, making sense then that it wants to maintain good relations with its neighbors and separate itself from the traditional middle power way of proceeding when faced with great powers requests.

However, in a region with such diversity, it begs the question of what happens with countries that are not middle powers but that are still relevant within the region. This brings us to countries like South Korea, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. In public conferences, these countries are often referred to as “Quad plus”. (Council on Foreign Relations. (s.f.). *The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know.*).

From Jakarta we are seeing a focus on sustainability and connectivity. They have been focused on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which means that they are the ones that take in the hits that the region suffers.

On the side of Hanoi, we can determine that the area of interest is maritime. They have been fighting against the Chinese aggressions in the South China Sea, this task has been an arduous one since China continuously transgresses the established rule of law of the sea.

Soeul, seeks to protect its interests through different policies such as the “New Southern Policy” and the “Blue Water Policy”, this last policy is centered around naval capabilities. It was last summer, in June 2025, when South Korea participated in the trilateral air drills that were carried out by the United States and Japan as an act of deterrence towards China.

In this delicate power balance, all these middle powers act in conjunction with other smaller powers to show both physical capabilities of defense as well as diplomatic means to counter an abuse of power over the region.

VII THE ROLE OF ECONOMICS

The bifurcation that economics and security present, lead to diversification being a key component within the region.

Several frameworks have been established to foster economic growth. As an example, “trade portfolios” have been created to ensure that coercion does not take place within the trade landscape. Funding comes from world entities such as BRICS (a power structure block that is composed by Brazil, the Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa amongst others previously mentioned), the World Bank or the New Development Bank all with the aim of sustaining economic sovereignty of each nation.

All of the countries in the region are aiming to ensure maritime security as well which requires large economic investment. It is an economic measure since protecting their trade pathways to fortify commerce and free trade, sustainable development and combating the challenges derived from climate change that make them vulnerable is key to feed their economies and make them more robust.

With this conjoint approach the economy of the region, flows more naturally and it is grounded in mutual support from the countries that make up the region. Acting as a unified block grants them the potential to be able to fight back against external threats outside the region that strive to take over it and impose their own favorable rules.

Further on, it will be seen in greater detail the role that the economy plays between Australia-China as well as between Australia-United States to have a more granular view of Australia’s middle power role from the monetary perspective.

VII AUSTRALIA WITHIN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific is a region where economic interdependence is a given and security is the great concern.

The economic pillar:

Australia has aimed to have a nuanced influence within the region, as it is referenced in the article “Australia’s strategic hedging in the Indo-Pacific: A neoclassical realist analysis of RCEP and AUKUS” (Rezza, S. (2025). Australia's Strategic Hedging in the Indo-Pacific: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of RCEP and AUKUS. *Jurnal Global*

Strategis) as well as through the creation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). There are three variables that the nation utilizes to balance against China while also not becoming entirely dependent on the United States. As part of this triad, we see an emphasis placed on the countries diplomacy strategies as well as an ongoing investment on their military capabilities.

The implementation of “systemic pressures” that seek to focus on areas whereby the country does not want to be negatively impacted, especially when it comes to its relation with China.

As the final element of the triad, we can see the value that is placed on individuals as change makers. Through Australia’s various presidents, one can see the different approaches that they have taken, particularly when it comes to China and the role it plays in the region in relation to Australia.

Through the RCEP, it is estimated that the bilateral trade between China and Australia exceeds the already astounding figure of 100 billion Australian dollars that was estimated for 2011. This manifests the deep interdependence between both countries. The main trade materials are iron ore and liquidated natural gas.

Australia, is part of the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) for several reasons; it serves as a great opportunity for trade diversification since they can reach countries all across the Indo-Pacific, thus creating strong commercial ties. It helps to create a connected interweb of ties with other middle powers. It also provides them with the opportunity to have a foot in the door of the regional market, hence, not turning Australia into an outcast within the Asian commercial architecture. At last, it also enhances productivity as well as integration and makes Australia an active participant in the region’s growth.

The security pillar:

As part of its security plan, Australia has formed alliances so that if it were necessary, it would have the pertinent resources and capabilities to defend itself. Australia has made these alliances not only for domestic benefit but also as an external façade of fortitude against China’s advances.

AUKUS is the prime example of how Australia is seeking to bolster its security (Caples, A., Gaida, J., & Cave, D. (2023, 6 of June). *AUKUS: three partners, two pillars, one*

problem. The Strategist.). Through nuclear-powered submarines. The AUKUS alliance, has caused some controversy. Some are adverse to this alliance as they see it as only containment centered and they also believe it to be exclusionary as it only embraces the UK, United States and Australia. Therefore, some feel left out. Those who have this sentiment are, largely, the smaller countries in the region that although they are important within the region, when it comes to international power they are lacking.

Others, fear that this deal will lead to nuclear proliferation. Since the Russia-Ukraine war started and Russia publicly adverted its adversaries with the potential use of nuclear weapons, all countries have started to take this threat as a serious menace. The idea of every country arming itself with nuclear weapons, creates a generalized fear that the use of these weapons might be inching up to become a reality. Added to this concern is the fact that this is not an arsenal that is kept in an isolated part of the country but rather in submarines that can move around with great ease. (Graham, E. (2025b, 29 of October). *AUKUS 'ambiguities' will need to be worked through.* The Strategist.).

It has also been criticized due to the fact that, as many allege, this pushes regional countries to militarize themselves and invest more in their own defense. It also deteriorates the trust between the nations that conform the region.

Perception is primordial when it comes to the security dilemma. How your “enemy” “rival” or under the preferred term to be categorized under, perceives that you can respond to their threat is when security, or at least the ideal of it, is built. It is based on the fear of retaliation that you can cause on the other.

From 2007 up until today, within Australia, different types of leadership from different echelons of power and influence, have shaped the China threat approach. The main three would be: Kevin Rudd – ambassador of Australia in the United States and also former labor party Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott – liberal party former Australian Prime Minister and Scott Morrison – liberal party former Australian Prime Minister.

Rudd was fluent in mandarin and this enabled him to have a “friendly” relationship with China. Under his command, China was categorized as a “critical friend”. It was through diplomacy he tackled this problematic since he believed that this was the most sustainable way to handle this matter.

Contrary to Rudd, Abbott opted for “more Jakarta, less Geneva”. He took a more pragmatic stance, a realpolitik approach. His main areas of focus were trade and increasing military alliances. It did not give as many results as it was hoped for and it was when Morrison came to power that he propelled the country to the AUKUS signing.

It was between 2020 and 2021 that Australia adopted the “Third Way” strategy. Through this strategic frame, three main areas were sought to be subjected to further analysis. On the one hand the excessive reliance on China for trade and hence, economic growth. Secondly, the over reliance on the United States for regional security and protection. Lastly, Australia focused on strengthening its military.

This all exemplifies how Australia has ventured out into trying to combat the risks that it has been encountering throughout this past decade. It has taken a step forward instead of idling by and just being a victim subjected to the issue at hand.

VIII THE AUSTRALIA- CHINA RELATIONS

“We need to cooperate with China where we can, disagree where we must and engage in our national interest” (ABC News (Australia). (s.f.). *Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong speaks on the relationship between China and Australia*), this was stated by the current Australian Prime Minister Albanese at the Beijing press conference and also cited by the Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong. It succinctly encapsules how Australia relates to China, which is shown to be an application of the stabilization doctrine by which the interests of Australia prevail over its possibly favorable or lack thereof relationship with China. It was during the Beijing visit in the month of July 2025 at the Annual Leaders Meeting where the two presidents, Xi and Albanese reaffirmed what is known as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Xi claimed that the Australia-China ties had “turned around and risen from the setbacks” as per Al Jazeera reporting. This showcases the ambiguous alignment that exists pertaining to the interlaced domains of economics and military.

This stance taken by the Australian government towards China has not been immune to certain criticism. The executive director of ASPI, Justin Bassi, has stated that “Australia

is only complying with China's desires when the government says nothing...Australia's sovereignty must not be contingent on Beijing's preferences". This critique frames the debate over whether or not stabilization is a prudent approach or simply a complacent one. The visit to Beijing by an Australian head of government, signals the will on both sides to re-anchor their relationship and return to the diplomatic norm.

The tripartite framing made by Albanese is an attempt at ambivalence through which engagement to build a better understanding did not amount to capitulation towards China.

One in four jobs in Australia, relies upon trade with China. It estimated that China accounts for more than a quarter of Australian exports, this being further proof of the economic interdependence at play between the two countries. The economic terms of understanding that are being sought out by Australia do not equate to a dialing down on its security stance. Australia has time and time again sustained its commitment to the AUKUS alliance. Therefore, we can firmly state that there is a central paradox in the China- Australia relations by which economic and military aspects advance parallel to one another in a compartmentalized approach across domains. (China Studies Centre. (s.f.). *Australia's relations with China: The illusion of choice, 1972-2022*).

The Chinese-Australian relationship has been continuously oscillating between cooperation and stagnation. At the time that Whitlam was president the realization that Australia was inextricably joined to Asia became abundantly clear. Nevertheless, as the international power plays morphed the subsequent Prime Ministers of Australia that would fill in Whitlam's shoes faced complication when it came to upholding cooperation over friction regarding both economic and military matters.

Bob Hawke viewed these aforementioned aspects as complementary and sought to prevent a derailment due to a merge of the two aspects. John Howard, introduced a stale mate of sorts and maintained the Chinese economic ties without it acting in detriment of the relationships that Australia had with other countries such as the United States of America. When Tony Abbott was in power, China was quickly rising as a superpower and its economic growth became rapid and unprecedented. This caused Australia to treat China with a certain degree of fear but also with the hope to maintain its monetary relation with the rising Asian giant.

Between the years of 2020 and 2022 under Scott Morrison the China-Australia relations underwent a hiatus all whilst the COVID-19 pandemic erupted. This change in relations

caused some of the tension that is still present nowadays. The Deng Xiaoping's era of Wang Yang Hui (hide your strength, bide your time) came to an end and it was replaced by an assertive stance under the current Chinese president Xi Jinping. This change caused a readjustment of the prevailing balance of power that was once present. As Kevin Rudd analyses, Beijing has undertaken a "tactical pause" so to not further aggravate the geopolitical tensions albeit this being a temporary measure. The long term vision remains the same and that is to achieve the "Great Renaissance of the Chinese people" by the time the year 2049 comes around. This goal has at its core the aspiration to obtain regional dominance. As one makes this claim, it is inevitable to ask oneself about Taiwan, which under this plan is seen as an "bi ran yao qiu" (an inevitable requirement). This would turn Australia's role as a middle power completely obsolete.

This notion brings us to what researcher David Fassimo determines as "Illusion of Choice" (China Studies Centre. (s.f.). *Australia's relations with China: The illusion of choice, 1972-2022*). This belief is that Australia will have to be able to clearly differentiate between its economic goals from its military ones. This has become an increasingly difficult challenge since the U.S. alliance has been fortified at the same time as the friction with China has been increasing. It is also worth noting that domestic politics play an important role that should not be undermined since Australia needs to appear sure and strong towards its own citizens when it comes to defending their national interests. This impossibility or rather, lack of interest or convenience to choose between the U.S. or China, has given birth to the policy that we see today with current Prime Minister Albanese; the "stabilization strategy".

Australia's labor's party Foreign Minister Penny Wong has been proof of the implementation of this new strategy by emphasizing the importance of diplomacy to "cool off" the ever rising geopolitical tensions all whilst not conceding on core elements of interests to Australia. Political combativeness has been left aside and disagreements are sought out to be resolved through diplomacy and abide by international law. The latter, has made Australia elevate the tone on some humanitarian cases such as the detention of Cheng Lei and Yang Hengjun. Which was framed as a situation of human rights concern.

Within the frame of this stabilization policy alliance like AUKUS, the Quad and ASEAN are vital as they enable Australia to maintain its alliances with Europe at the same time as it provides an opportunity to advance its technology, especially that related to nuclear powered boats. The Quad is also a positive counterweight and enables the Southeast Asian

nations to exercise their own foreign policy without being completely hand cuffed to China when engaging in bilateral dealings.

As former Prime Minister Paul Keating put it, Australia should switch from the notion of finding security from Asia and turn towards finding security in it.

From a Chinese point of view, they believe that any disruption to their sovereignty is an imminent threat that affects directly their economic development goals. These goals are tethered to the ideals mentioned before as “Great Renaissance of the Chinese People”. China seeks to have absolute party leadership by making, or rather maintaining, the military under the command of Xi Jinping. Paired to this goal, they aim to better their military capabilities so that it makes their military a world class force that signals power. Through these advancements they aim to secure their borders and maritime regions by forcefully acting against those whom they perceive as bullies. China also aims to fortify its economic growth by creating new commerce routes such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

All these principles point towards what is commonly denominated as “One China Principle” or “One China Policy”. Chinese ambassador to Australia, Xiao Qian, as part of the policy/principle, views Taiwan as “a province of China”. This acknowledgement goes beyond diplomatic rhetoric and unequivocally places China’s territorial sovereignty as one of their main priorities. This rather legalistic point of view makes the web of diplomatic ties between Australia-China and Australia-Taiwan all the more complicated. It translates into an abandonment of diplomatic discourse and a plausible trigger to action.

However, Beijing is not one to usually carry the burden of escalation in the region. They make use of what is known as “Anti-Secession Law” to shift said burden to whom they accuse of being “separatist forces”. The Anti-Secession Law, delineates three elements that could lead The People’s Liberation Army to carry out “means other than peaceful”. On the one hand, one of these elements is any act that is undertaken to formally obtain independence. The other of the three elements is external interference, this would enable China to act against those who attack their sovereignty (such as trying to separate Taiwan from the mainland). Finally, the last of the three and the most subjective one, is the exhaustion of peaceful means. When the peaceful tools of conflict resolution have been deemed lost then force can be legitimately applied. This last point seems to be a test of patience rather than an actual exhaustion of peaceful means.

Deciphering if Beijing's actions are a threat or a warning sometimes seems to be a linguistic trap that hides their true intent. A warning, under Beijing's criteria is a reciprocal response to provocation (e.g. the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, described by China as the "biggest arms sale" to Taiwan was seen as provocative). As a response to this provocation they claim to act as an act of deterrence. The impact that these warnings have on regional security is that they turn escalation as the norm and equate to a standard diplomatic response. Contrary to warnings, they also talk about threats which they define as an "unprovoked act of aggression or bullying". When it comes to threats, they deny ever using them, they never position themselves as the ones who issue them but rather as the victims. This victimizing act is often used as a means to coerce the smaller, less powerful nations in the region. This all creates a very carefully curated narrative in which China is the one who is advocating for the rule of law when in reality, it is slowly engulfing Taiwan with its military presence.

With this conundrum at hand, private diplomacy has risen. This is due to the 300 billion AUD trade partner that Australia is to China, making it its number one partner in that area (barley, wine, coal etc.). China offers Australia stability in that which concerns trade as long as they do not raise their voice when it comes to denouncing maritime and human rights disputes.

The Chinese aims are uninterrupted and their highly subjective legal framework for taking actions makes the relation with Australia all the more convoluted. Australia is tangled in an intricate web of interests that pose a serious threat not only to itself but to the region as a whole. As it is stated in an opinion piece from the outlet The Strategist titled "resilience should be Australia's answer to economic coercion", Australia should aim for economic resilience as well as supply diversification so that it does not get stuck in an ongoing back and forth between capitulation or retaliation responses towards China. This is a purposefully middle power strategy that would greatly serve Australia's interests. Strategic economic engagement can become Australia's bastion of autonomy and prosperity.

Having had a look at Australia-China relations, it is pivotal that the Taiwan invasion question is addressed. By 2027, next year, Xi Jinping has set out to have invaded Taiwan. The proximity of the plausible event has made the situation to be assessed as an "imminent threat". It has created an urgency in the security and defense planning of

Australia and its allies since Beijing is not bluffing when it make this claims, it has been preparing itself for years.

Beijing has sophisticated its nuclear arsenal and it has augmented its industrial and energy reserves which include iron, cobalt, oil and copper. It has also invested in amphibious barges that have structures similar to bridges that enable shallow water landing, giving them a maritime advantage in the event an invasion were to take place. Furthermore, they have been recurrently practicing and perfecting an “invasion simulation” exercise of Taiwan so that when the time comes they are not caught unprepared. Intent and capabilities have been merged and this has alerted Australia since it would automatically convert the nation into an essential operational pillar.

Australia has become a critical operational hub for the United States who also sees this invasion as a very likely upcoming event. One of the benefits that the U.S. sees in Australia is that it is outside China’s usual strike range but is close enough to uphold intensity within a combat situation if it were needed.

In order to prepare for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Australia has joined forces with the U.S. by deploying six U.S. B-52 bombers to the RAAF Base Tindal to reinforce deterrence. Moreover, marines have been deployed to Darwin so that American and Australian soldiers fight as one force. And, one billion dollars have been invested to better infrastructures such as eleven giant jet fuel storage tanks and specialized operations facilities.

Even though Australia is preparing itself militarily, it is not blind to the fact that a conflict that affects the trade of Taiwan would block its trade and also affect the security of two of its closest partners: South Korea and Japan. This would cause an absolute maritime blockade that could potentially not end in Taiwan since China aims for further territorial incursions in other areas of the Indo-Pacific. If trade is blocked, Australia would be isolated and its life line would be cut short. It would also mean that Australia would have lost its economic trade alliance with China, making the nations economy collapse and enter into a crisis. It would be evidence that economic neutrality is simply not an option for Australia since neutrality equals self-harm.

Also a neutrality would not only become problematic in economic terms but also in military ones too. Neutrality would terminate the ANZUS and AUKUS alliance since it would remove Australia as a security guarantor. China has warned Australia claiming that

this proximity and military fusion with the United States will have Beijing see them as co-belligerent. This places a direct target on Australia's back.

Should Taiwan be invaded, China would undoubtedly look at Australia as one of the first places to land an attack on since by doing so the U.S. command and control would be blinded and unable to act rapidly. Pine Gap facility would probably be the elected the area for Beijing's first strike since it is known to be the base for "Electronic Order of Battle" since it has up to 45 antennas that help collect intelligence.

Any action from China against Taiwan will unavoidably have detrimental effects on Australian soil. The echoes of an invasion would alter the regions dynamics forever and as prominent Chinese international relations expert, Victor Gao states : "if a war breaks out, it will be total war...if Australia wants to forfeit all its economic interest with China and always embrace the United States in the hostilities against China...if Australia wants to go into war which may lead to Armageddon, you need to think about the consequences".

IX THE AUSTRALIA- U.S RELATIONS

The Australia- U.S. relations are critical within the Indo-Pacific landscape. Regional deterrence is needed more than ever and as technology evolves at a high speed, the AUKUS alliance has gained even more relevance. This alliance exemplifies the paradigm shift that is currently taking place. The focus has transitioned from what was termed as "policy conversations" to what is now frequently referenced as "deployable capability". (Hellyer, M. (2022, 27 of October). *Making the most of AUKUS*. The Strategist.).

The technological edge that is needed to combat the military build-up that China has undergone, underscores the importance of AUKUS. The combined forces of the Australian, United Kingdom and American military act as a multiplying force against that of China. It is also a triad that enables joined forces to develop top notch technology that can face the new challenges that have and will arise.

Being all three AUKUS members co-developers, has given place to a 368 billion dollar investment amount.

AUKUS Pillar Two has eight areas of capabilities that are worth analyzing in some detail. All of the eight areas do not work as siloed workstreams but rather, they work synergically so that from the sea all the way to space, these three main partners are aware of all that goes on.

The eight areas are as follows:

-On the one hand there are undersea robotics that are known as UUVs that enable constant surveillance of subsea cables. This is an enhancement in their maritime presence. The aspiration is to create an “undersea battlespace” by 2027 so that the 15 submarine cables that carry the bulk of Australia’s internet are protected. The “ghost sharks” will swarm the undersea to act as patrol agents. Vessels like the “Bluebottle” will act as links between assets in the sea and satellite networks. Finally, quantum sensors and sonar technology will be used to be informed about what happens in areas that are prone to conflict. The implementation of this technology will consist of three phases the first one being reform, the second one coordination and the third one co-innovation.

-Positioning, Navigation and Timing technologies (PNT) have also been implemented to combat the challenges that arise where GPS is denied or works poorly.

-Artificial Intelligence has also been used to improve security in the region, specifically to purchase a higher amounts of systems that can work autonomously.

-C2, this is what is known as “advanced cyber”. It helps protect sovereign networks as well as disrupt “command-and-control” (C2) nodes.

-Long-range and high-speed hypersonic that are able to penetrate anti-access areas as well as intercepting threats.

-Electromagnetics. They are used to obfuscate movements from “enemy” sensors , thus making sure that the conversations are kept between allies.

-Implementation of the “accelerator model” to efficiently use technology in multifaceted challenges.

-Overcoming bureaucratic timings. Through a harmonization of regulation, processes take less time and can be implemented at a faster pace.

Each of these elements is advancing at a different pace which in turn means that if the goals set out for each one of these technologies is not reached, Pillar Two could just be parked as an unattainable ideal that is never truly reached.

The rapid iteration that artificial intelligence is bringing about has proven how ill-equipped the bureaucratic system are to face this new face paced defense paradigm. Taking into consideration that all AUKUS actions are evaluated by three separate countries with their own interests and hence their own bureaucracy, makes the aforementioned synchronicity all the more complicated.

The possibility of creating a bottleneck effect on all processes that involve AUKUS is a possibility that may occur due to internal disagreements. Australia being the novice out of all three countries is the one that stands the most risk.

Nevertheless, straying away from a pessimistic outlook, Australia has heavily engaged with the private sector so that investments are made to fund these ambitious goals within the alliance. Although at times the lack of a clear pathway has kept some investors on the fence. The solutions to this have been done under the “Innovation Advantage Analysis” by which reforms such as a clear budget, reallocation of capital in the case that end goals are not met, creation of engagement mechanisms and creating near-term goals paired with supply chain support, have been implemented.

The caveat to this alliance is not only the possible internal frictions but also the clock-ticking race against China. According to the Australian’s Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) Critical Technology Tracker, China is the leader in 19 out of the 23 technologies that AUKUS seeks to implement.(Australian Strategic Policy Institute. (2023, March). *ASPI’s two-decade critical technology tracker*.). In areas like hypersonic, sonar and electronic warfare China has a three times larger research output compared to the Unites States, who is a key ally especially in the military aspect within AUKUS. The edge that the alliance of which Australia is part of, is that pertaining to artificial intelligence and quantum computing. Aggregating efforts will give AUKUS members a heads up when coming face to face with highly sophisticated systems that are extremely hard to penetrate.

Perhaps, one of the aims that should be included within this alliance is to break free from it being an exclusively “anglo alliance”. This would be particularly convenient for Australia since including countries like Japan or South Korea would enable the alliance to feed off from their strengths in manufacturing and missiles.

Success under AUKUS will depend on whether it overcomes the current American administration under Donald J Trump and its strict America First policy. There have been ongoing requirements from the United States towards Australia to increase its military spending and up it to 3.5% of its GDP (Reuters. (2025, 1 of June). *US asks Australia to increase defense spending to 3.5% GDP.*). In a way, the Americans are urging Australia to transition from policy and move to the capability realm which at the end of the day is the only element that truly matters.

Additionally, the success of this alliance will also depend on what occurs within what is denominated as the “southern flank”. This is a maritime corridor that includes the Strait of Malacca as well as the South China Sea. Having already mentioned the importance of commerce for Australia’s economy and how it heavily relies on its relations with China as well as the AUKUS objectives that have a prevalent naval component, it goes without saying that this is a strategic area within the region of the Indo-Pacific.

A denial of access to this flank, would impede the capacity of the submarines or any boat for that matter to traverse through those waters. Thus, it would mean an impediment of trade within said region and the economic outcomes that would ensue would be very detrimental.

The “San Francisco System” (Frühling, S. (2024, 23 of April). *Five factors will decide the survival of the US-led alliance system.* The Interpreter.) was the result of bilateral alliances that based their relations in traditional norms. However, due to the emergence of a more transactional diplomacy, the traditional norms based system has become atrophied. What is placed at the center of every affiliation now is the potential or immediate gains that it will render. Therefore, enduring alignment is left in the backseat.

The main alliances within this southern flank are the ANZUS Treaty members (Australia, New Zealand and the United States) this treaty accounts for more than seventy years of support for the rules based order, the bilateral defense treaties with the Philippines (Mutual Defense Treaty from 1951, especially focused on counterterrorism. It was further sustained by the former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in relation to the South China Sea) and Thailand (strong cooperation in security matters) as well as the partnerships established with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore (Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2015, which includes cooperation in defense and intelligence) and Vietnam.

In 2017 this was all formally structured by the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2022, December). *National Security Strategy of Japan*). The FOIP set out certain precepts such as an absolute respect for national sovereignty, promotion of open markets, independence and autonomy from all nations as well as adherence to the rule of law. These all appear to be reasonable principles that should be easy to abide by, however, with the current U.S. administration that looks out for its own interests over the multilateral ones these objectives may not hold to be true in practice.

Adopting the transactional diplomacy point of view, maintaining an alliance with a super power, that has a foreign policy that is quite volatile due to changes in priorities caused by domestic political swings, and at times overlooks treaty obligations might not be the best strategic decision. The “common vision” that is usually invoked may not be all that common when it comes to the U.S, especially if one has to take into considerations its latest actions such as the attempt to annex Greenland.

It may be convenient to follow the example of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)(ASEAN. (s.f.). *The Founding of ASEAN*.) since they seek to avoid absolute dominance from both China or the United States. Amidst the competition between great-powers, the states that comprise this association apply a pragmatic look to uphold their sovereignty and their own interests in the region.

Philippines as part of ASEAN, aims for economic integration with China whilst it has a mutual defense agreement with the U.S. should there be an attack on a Philippine vessel in the South China Sea. In the case of Bangkok, it carries out the so called “Cora Gold” exercise in conjunction with the U.S. whilst it also invests in its military alliances with China. Hanoi, is focused on building Coast Guard capacity as well as sustaining its participation in RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific-it is the largest maritime warfare exercise in the world). It does not alienate itself from China since it sees Beijing as an indispensable neighbor. Contrary to Vietnam, Jakarta seeks active yet not formal engagement with both the U.S. and Australia. Finally, Kuala Lumpur carries out exercises like “Cope Taufan 18” (a tactical airlift exercise done by the United States Air Force in conjunction with the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF)) that aims to achieve aerial superiority.

All in all, Australia should use its leverage when it can to bolster its position in the region. Bases like Pine Gap (a satellite tracking and signals intelligence base) situated in the Northern Territory and the Harold E. Holt naval communication station in Western Australia that provides very low frequency radio transmissions demonstrate what Australia can offer within the alliance. Also, it is worth noting that Australia has made a five billion dollar investment into U.S. submarine production as well as hosting U.S. submarines to run maintenance and sustainment checks. Australia has a lot of skin in the game and is willing to act in a collaborative manner with the U.S. It is the latter who, at times, due to domestic political whims seems to be less steadfast in its policy consistency.

In the event that Australia is unable to count with the United States support, it should endeavor to be more self-reliant. This would mean advancing its capacity to deploy autonomous air and sea systems to ensure that its maritime presence is not diminished, it should also seek to integrate systems like THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) or Patriot (MIM-104) so that cyber-attacks do not pose as big of a threat. Australia should also aim to reinforce and invest in developing intelligence systems since it seems to be the future of not only information but also warfare. It could also be convenient to reinforce its ties with the European Union and countries like India.

X THE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA

Australia's economic implications within the Indo-Pacific framework are largely dependent on Beijing's economic movements. China has moved from a focus on production enhancements to an stimulation of domestic consumption. This posture has also been adopted by the Reserve Bank of Australia since it can benefit Australian exports.

This readjustment came from China's change in policy, manifested in the Politburo September 2024 announcements. This Politburo refers to the economic and financial initiatives taken by the People's Bank of China (PBOC). Central to their policy is a reinforcement of the private sector in order to counter the decline that has taken place due to a reduction in foreign investment. The Chinese government has made this change visible when President Xi met with Jack Ma. Jack Ma is a Chinese entrepreneur as well as the president and founder of the extremely successful Alibaba Group. The policy

change was also made clear when the artificial intelligence “DeepSeek” program was launched.

Data from 2025 indicates that this turnaround has helped China recover by anchoring itself in three main pillars. On the one hand, protecting itself from all the global trade shocks that could take place. On the other hand, a strong commitment towards the private sector, especially within the technology/artificial intelligence sector. Lastly, price stabilization has enabled China to fight against international market volatility.

It was when the United States, on the 2nd of April 2025, placed tariffs on Chinese goods of up to an astounding 145% that the global trade fractured itself. A breather of sorts took place when the “90 day trade truce” occurred. This respite was only temporary because complications arose when the United States walked back on the tariffs imposed to China’s Southeast Asian neighbors.

Even if the U.S. attempted this embargo on China’s trade, the United States has been subject to higher trade vulnerability. China exports a high amount of smartphones, computers, lithium batteries etc. for which the U.S. is a high demander of. This obliged the United States to make certain exemptions so that inflation would not rise. The United States, exports textiles amongst other low-end manufacturing materials to China but China does not suffer greatly from this loss of exports since it can diversify its buyers in this area.

What this geopolitical landscape means for Australia is determined by the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) and the World Bank projections. They estimate that China’s GDP will grow this 2026 up to 4.4% (World Bank. (2025, December 11). *Advancing reforms can enhance prospects: China economic update*). Australia benefits from this due to its iron ore. Steel demand has risen for manufacturing purposes and this means that a great market opportunity window for Australia has been opened. Nevertheless, one has to be mindful of this because the shift towards energy transition could dampen the spirits. If Australia were to upgrade its energy competencies to become suitable for EAF (Electric Arc Furnaces) the threat that it faces in this sector would be greatly minimized.

Other sectors do not project a dim outlook on China’s economic growth as it was reported by The Shanghai Australian Chamber of Commerce when it engaged with multiple firms within the healthcare, agriculture and retail space. They had a positive outlook on China’s economic stimulus aimed at recovery and some believed that market volatility could be

used to their advantage. However, these firms are the ones that have been able to face the United States tariffs which calls into question if the optimism that is portrayed would be the same from those who have not.

Australia must rely on integration in order to face the potential creation of technological silos that will prohibit the merge of economics and security. Inflationary supply chains would mean that Australia's RBA would have to place in higher interest rates amidst a decline in growth. It is also a possibility that if Chinese firms are impeded from selling in the United States, the Chinese focus might shift to the Australian market. It initially seems like a positive turn of events, however, this would be quite detrimental for Australian local producers.

This will translate into Australia having to look closely to control inflation rates that may come from the change in supply chains. It will also have to pay attention to the Chinese consumer patterns since it will indicate how well Australia is doing pertaining to exports.

Australia's economy is deeply intertwined with the Chinese economy, therefore, it is in Australia's best interest for China to survive the ever changing international trade landscape whilst also budgeting for military activities and infrastructures jointly done with the Americans.

XI AUSTRALIA – INDIA RELATIONS AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE

The relation India-Australia is marked by a strong bilateralism especially since 2020 since ever since, India has undergone a profound transformation that has made the relation evolve from the popularly and often said in jest “Three Cs” (Commonwealth, curry and cricket). This outlook towards a more mature relation has given birth to what has been named as Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The increasing tensions in the Indo-Pacific has highlighted the need for more robust relations and the need to seek aligned interests.

The three key features of the relation between the two is defense, diplomacy and economic incentives. On the defense end, there has been an increase in operational integration and access to mutual bases. When it comes to diplomacy, it has taken a pragmatic tone especially related to economic incentives since there is a focus on building a strong supply chain as well as securing critical minerals. Also, both India and Australia have been actively working on their agency from super powers such as the United States. As of sorts, they aim to establish their own rules within the existing multipolar system.

In June 2020, the Virtual Summit was held. It was the catalyst for this new proximity in relations. Both Morrison, former Australian Prime Minister, and Modi formalized the CSP strategy. This permitted New Delhi and Canberra to start working towards common goals amidst a rapidly changing international stage.

The main anchor of this union is defense, concretely, maritime defense. Indian and Australian armed forces have engaged in several operations such as the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement 2020, which enabled access to military bases. The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogues were annual meetings between Defense and Foreign Ministers to find alignment in all elements that may concern foreign policy; it was especially targeted at that which affects defense. Another relevant exercise was exercise Pitch Black and Malabar that included the Indian Air Force within the Australian combat exercises. There have also been officer exchange programs, namely the “General Bipin Rawat exchange program” to foster the links already made amongst upcoming generations. Furthermore, in 2021 an Australian liaison officer within India’s maritime security circle was placed.

Current Australian Prime Minister, Albanese visited the INS Vikrant ship and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles flew on a P8 Indian surveillance plane that flew from Goa to Delhi. These moves are strategic ones since they signal further compromise in operational liaisons.

Minerals and cyber technology are primordial within each of their supply chains. This is particularly relevant as they strive to not depend as much on “not so trusted” partners as China. Several partnerships have been established to counter this such as the Cyber and Critical Technology Partnership in 2020 that tries to set standards for technology ecosystems that can be trusted. The Critical Minerals Investment Partnership from 2022 is also quite relevant since its intended goal is to secure minerals that are essential energy transition and tech manufacturing. This partnership has encountered some adversities

since China has state subsidies that make the prices fluctuate. Other two relevant partnerships are the Australia-India Renewable Energy Partnership that proved the commitment of both nations towards renewable energy transition and the Supply Chain Initiative (SCRI) includes Japan in order to have a more diverse manufacturing outlets.

All this proves the existence of a real intent to work in lockstep. However, bureaucratic loopholes and the tardiness it inflicts, lead to a difficulty in translating diplomatic intent into real tangible outcomes. An example of this would be the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ETA) which made trade go up to 50 billion dollars. Nevertheless, the foreign investment that India accounts for within Australia's total is only 0.6%. Controversial leaders like Manish Tewari question the "rules-based order" that Australia advocates for since it calls into question whose orders are those that are viewed as the right ones to follow. The distinct elements of focus, being Australia's the maritime navigation freedom and being India's the humanitarian crises it faces, makes operational outcomes hard to achieve despite good intent. These gaps have been attempted to be bridged by institutions like The Centre of Australia-India Relations as well as the Australia – India CEO Forum, however, more capital investment is needed in order to be able to fully accomplish said bridging exercise. Another element that may be cause of derailment is the Sikh separatism that is taking place in India causing political friction.

For now, Australia and India are two middle powers that are at a cross roads in the region. The focus should be on securing their maritime alliance which has taken a step forward with the port connectivity project called Sagarmala Project in India and Australia's increased focus on the Northeast Indian Ocean. They both also aim to create joint alliances with other countries such as Japan or Indonesia in order to secure navigation routes. And, as always, this will all require monetary investment that translates everything that is on paper into a verifiable and actionable reality.

XII THE AUSTRALIA – EUROPEAN UNION NEW SECURITY AND DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE

Back in March of this year, the Security and Defense Partnership (SDP) has manifested how the European Union is willing to get involved in the Indo-Pacific as the unipolar system is being contested. The geographic distancing from one another has been overcome by this convergence in defense, security and trade. Similarly, as it was previously detailed in the Australia-India chapter, the EU-Australia relation has taken a similar path from traditional diplomacy to an increased intertwinement when it comes to defense and trade matters.

European Union's High Representative Kaja Kallas, the Australian Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense Richard Donald Marles as well as Foreign Minister Penny Wong formalized this mandate on March 18th 2026. President Ursula Von der Leyen claimed that this partnership signified the building of "lasting, trust-based structures" to face the increasing instability.(European Commission. (2026, March 24). *EU and Australia strengthen relations with Security and Defence Partnership and Trade Agreement*). The shifts that have been occurring in the Indo-Pacific, have been a point of concern for Australia but also for the EU since Europe has interests in that region as well. This partnership has a heavy focus on the defense of the rules based international order, which is a core element of the EU in all of its foreign policy mandates as an institution founded upon liberal principles. Both strive to preserve the multilateral order against the actors in the region that attempt to take on revisionist postures and lead in all of their foreign policy actions with systemic pressure. This point holds a lot of weight since as Kaja Kallas stated, "Europe and Australia are oceans apart, but our security and prosperity are tightly linked. Our new Security and Defense Partnership and trade agreement will make Europeans and Australians safer and more prosperous. Practically, we boost cooperation in a multitude of areas from cyber threats to maritime security, while creating greater market access for our businesses and more choice for our citizens. In an increasingly dangerous world, strong partnerships like ours are the best defense". This indicates how there is a readiness to get more seriously involved in all areas that will enable a steadier alliance to face upcoming challenges worldwide. For the EU, this makes it a more assertive actor within the region; as for Australia, it expands its network with other democracies in the world that are willing to combat the regional instabilities.

The "robust institutional framework" upon which this partnership is built upon, has given place to the "Security and Defense Dialogues" which serve as a trampoline of sorts to propel ideas into results. The institutional framework that is at play consists of a first level

in which ministers from both sides, guide the strategic actions that are required to be taken. On the level below, the dialogues in matters concerning security and defense will take place. Thus, merging the political and technical aspects to drive feasible outcomes. On the base level, there are the experts that are in charge of implementing the final decisions taken through the chain of command. In a way, all of these levels act as an intricate translation chain that avoids the dilution of the main goal.

In terms of operational matters, mechanisms to tackle humanitarian contingencies and crisis management has been detailed so that responses are coordinated. Australia has also started to engage in EU civilian and military lead missions so that work in the field is as effective as possible. This has meant an integration of personnel so that knowledge and expertise can be put in common. This merge grants Australia a unique opportunity since it gives it a European perspective and it enhances a partnership with trusted democracies that have an aligned vision.

The main domains of concern for Australia, as it has been mentioned through this paper, are: maritime security so that freedom of navigation is allowed, cyber security so that actors with malicious intent are not able to harm infrastructure, economic threats that usually translate into coercion or attacks on visible vulnerabilities within institutions and, lastly combat the surge of disinformation outlets that spread inaccurate information and harm the bedrock of democracies. Therefore, what renders this agreement with a certain degree of novelty, is the focus on social cohesion and the protection of the democratic fabrics that are under attack under the current international state of affairs.

Given the circumstances within the region and the interests of both parties, innovation within the technological realm is an imperative if successful results want to be achieved. Artificial intelligence is a non-negotiable nowadays if one does not want to stay behind and the EU and Australia are fully aware of this. However, within the framework of their agreement, they advocate for an ethical approach that does not overly rely of technological outputs. Moreover, a special focus is placed on fostering disarmament and non-proliferation so that weapons of mass destruction do not become widespread and left unregulated. All this to reinforce the exchange of information so that a more clear picture of the region can be depicted for both parties.

This agreement is not a sideline agreement but rather a foundational one in which the regional status-quo is changed and a broader spectrum of supporting partners is presented.

It rebrands in a way the middle power notion that have had as of late and gives it a fresher more forward-looking diplomatic perspective.

XIII CONCLUSION

This paper was set out to examine Australia's role as a middle power. It takes a look at the cooperation and at times rivalry between the United States and China within the Indo-Pacific region. Both super powers relations with Australia and the economic impact for Australia have been outlined alongside with the India and the European Union relations. Drawing all of these analysis together, one can determine that Australia is seeking to differentiate itself from being solely seen as the middle power caught in between the Chinese and United States tug of war. Australia has firmly aligned itself with certain powerful domains such as the European Union to uphold the rules based order and with the United States when it comes to defense.

Trying to understand Australia's positioning by simply questioning whether it stands with China or the U.S. would be the wrong question to ask. Australia's positioning varies attending the subject matter that is being discussed. The Chinese Australian relations are better understood under the umbrella of peaceful coexistence and economic interests. The Albanese government does not advocate for a return to the 2017 relation but rather aims to stabilize relations. This compartmentalization is a demonstration of how Australia is managing its regional positioning without compromising its interests.

In contrast to its relation with China, Australia has made a decisive move within the security and defense domain by allying itself with the United States and the United Kingdom in the AUKUS agreement. This alignment has solidified Australia's commitment with the defense and security of the region, however, as it is showed in the chapter related to this matter, some policy makers and analysts are growing wary of Australia's reliance on the U.S. claiming that it should aim to be more self-reliant. This claim is made due to the unpredictability of domestic U.S. politics and therefore the lack of assurance that the Indo-Pacific will remain a focal point in their foreign policy agenda.

This embedded anxiety on the reliability of the Americans support and attention on the region signifies the importance of Australia looking for alliances outside their scope. Such alliances are as detailed in this paper, India and the European Union. These are not peripheral alliances, they hold notable value since these bilateral relations create strategic partnerships that are forged and have the potential of shifting the paradigm within the region.

Through the Quad, the relationship with India has been deepened. In the current paradigm that the region finds itself in, it is strategically sensible for Australia to reduce its focus on the great powers and create micro alliances with countries in the region that will invigorate its stance. Thus why, its increased proximity with the European Union enables Australia to create some distance from China and the economic, particularly trade, dependence that it has with Beijing. This new avenue for economic growth sets Australia free from the China-United States binary.

As a way to move forward, looking to the future with less dependence on the already mentioned super powers has been seen to be on Australia's agenda. It is also worth mentioning the relevance of ASEAN members. Particularly Philippines and Malasia, since Malasia is known for being really good at hedging. Often times it has faced U.S. threats to take action if they did not abide by their policies and Malasia held its ground. They are also equidistant between China and the U.S, which is an attitude that Australia can benefit from. When it comes to the Philippines, the American Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, gave a speech at Shangri-La and highlighted how the country only spends about 1% to 2% of its GDP on defense. What this says about the defense policy in the country is that whilst military modernization may be a necessity and a political aim, the infrastructure of the country may not allow it to take place just yet. For decades, the focus was on its internal security but in 2012 when China illegally occupied a maritime space owned by the Philippines, the country woke up to a harsh truth: the need to have more robust defense mechanisms. This shift in gears that the Philippines have been embarking on is akin to that of Australia although at different magnitudes. The need for both countries to get on track and figure out a way to better defense, requires reliance on external partnerships so that security in the region can become a collective matter and not just a solitary race against everyone else. It is precisely in the maritime realm where Australia could find great support from ASEAN countries. This is due to the fact that, if a general code of conduct is redacted that serves as a general framework of action in the

region, it would break to a certain degree the asymmetry of power that keeps the region beholden. It would call countries such as China to restrain themselves and act on the basis of international law. It would also bring about unity between like-minded countries and it would make them look up from their narrowly self-interest guided ambitions. The key to the success of this framework would be the enforcement mechanisms so that the agreements become actionable. It may be key in Canberra's balancing act. This balancing needs to be done from a pragmatic standpoint, meaning that Australia should not cut ties with the United States since it needs that alliance to foster its defense and security mechanisms. Nevertheless, this should not deter it from conforming strong relationships with other smaller powers in the region. The bottom line is that the priority should not be reduced to only one policy aspect but rather, there should be a multitude of priorities depending on the interests at hand. In essence this is what situates Australia as a middle power.

This resilient approach that Australia has adopted in regards to their foreign policy, is situating the country more so as a regional power than a middle power. All the actions that its taking are leading up to this change in role. Australia is proving that it not only wants a seat at the table but it also deserves one. It is converting into a regional power since it is setting up the agenda of the region instead of being a conduit of applicability for other countries that have interests in the region but are perhaps geographically distanced from it. The worst case scenario for the future would be that Australia takes a step back from pursuing more self-reliance and goes back to following another countries lead. This would be erroneous because Australia's new fortified alliances not only prove its importance in the region but it is also a vehicle for influence. Addressing some of the most contested issues in the region gives Australia the upper hand to group its allies in favour of enhancing security in the region amidst constant geopolitical changes.

Taking a look into the possible future of the region, a transition from viewing China as a problem to be contained rather than engaged with might be pivotal. The containment notion might have been at the core of some of the problems that have transpired. China acts based on risk assessment, therefore, if an engagement approach is adapted then it may stop viewing every external action related to security as a threat to its interests. Further to this point, the name Indo-Pacific immediately excludes China and hence,

makes them perceive it as a potential threat since it's a regional title that they are intentionally excluded from.

This all brings it down to the importance of Australia having a coherent and calibrated action plan. Each domain of interest should have its proper framework and way of action. This is what it means for Australia to be a middle power that is little by little maturing into a regional one, it is embracing its circumstances and potentiating them by joining forces with countries that have the same predicament. In a way, the current foreign Australian foreign policy trend is underpinning the new direction that is taking by parting ways with continuity and reorienting itself to solve the regional puzzle of which it is part of. This reorientation, dismantles the preconceived notion that Australia will always choose the United States above all else. The economic, security and defense needs have crushed this oversimplification of the nations foreign policy and have served as a way of visualizing all that is to come. The path forward should be, turning Australia into a proactive regional power that is no longer relegated to being a mere pawn of both Beijing and Washington. Breaking free from this ingrained middle power definition, permits Australia to approach the regional neighbors through different dynamics. The status quo of strategic approach in the region is that of an anarchical logic but this should not mean that other approaches such as a friendship logic, that neighbors like Indonesia apply, are not as effective and be taken into consideration.

Security oriented and alliance building policies give a lot of weight to rivalry and sovereignty; mechanisms such as ANZUS and the Quad signal it. However, diplomacy and other soft power techniques also grants security assurances but from a more neutral and "friend like" approach. ASEAN is a clear example of the latter whereby it promotes the regions centrality but through a more inclusive outlook. Under the rapid Chinese assertiveness, having a multitude of varied alliances will only make Australia stronger and less fragile in the eyes of Beijing.

Whilst this is the ideal, there is an understandable level of anxiety coming from Canberra in trying to manage its concurrent relationships with China and the U.S.. The fact that its main economic partner is China and its main defense partner is the United States, makes matters all the more complicated. The partners that it has for two main areas are fierce competitors with each other. The shift towards a more transactional notion of diplomacy seen, for example, in actions taken by U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby, whereby they urge Australia to

position itself in light of a potential Taiwan invasion from the Chinese, showcases the pressure that is placed on Australia to either be “in or out” and having to demonstrate it through visible contributions (such as the 5 billion dollar investment in U.S. submarines yards). Even though this has been the stance taken by the U.S. towards its allies, this does not mean that Australia cannot anchor itself through institutionalism in other areas such as the Southern Flank. Strategic ambiguity, leaves Australia having to decide whether it will marry its forces to those of the U.S. or if it will only act in a complementary manner.

Over-reliance on either of the great-powers will render Australia significantly vulnerable. That is why, diversifying its economic trade will be crucial. Trade expansion through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the identification of other markets will reduce the trade complications should a great power such as China try to coerce Australia in any way. Furthermore, broadening its economic cooperation with neighboring countries such as Singapore, Japan and New Zealand can be key to unlocking new trade avenues. A greater economic investment in not only trade but also the military would also give Australia a great vantage point since it would grant them executive independence that can be particularly useful in matters such as maritime trade. This would translate into a cease of the need to be economically supported *by* the U.S. and step into becoming a country that *is in support of* the U.S.. This subtle yet potent change can make a world of difference in Australia’s positioning.

It is then paramount that Australia becomes more self-reliant so that it can operate with greater autonomy. Australia is not an auxiliary of the U.S and therefore, it should not act as such. It has the capacity to protect its own territory, reason enough for the military lens to change and start seeing the U.S. as an Australian operations ally and not the other way around. Bypassing the military logic, could give place to an Asia-Pacific forum in which trouble-shooting was done and common ground solutions were found. It could be akin to the European Union in the sense that it would symbolize the union of the whole region and not just parts of it to work alongside one another to legislate, invest and debate crucial matters. A common agenda of sorts would be created.

All in all, Australia must come to terms with the fact that the rules based order is just one of the many set of rules that guide countries in the region, where security, military and economic interests are constantly overlapping. Middle power mentality should be left behind and a regional power one should be adopted, a containment of China should also be left behind and strategic engagement could be the new framework. The overly reliant

on great powers approach needs to morph into a more audacious and proactive stance, as it is required to impede single power dominance and solidify Australian capacities as the regions leader.

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ANNEXURE



Curso 20__/_

ANEXO: Declaración de uso de herramientas de IA generativa

Nombre Grado/Máster:	Grado en Derecho y Relaciones Internacionales (E-5)
Nombre Alumno:	Elena Portilla Torres
Coordinador/a TFG/TFM:	Marta Paradés Martín
Nombre Director/a de TFG/TFGM:	Manuel Alberdi

Declaro que para la elaboración del presente Trabajo Fin de Grado / Trabajo Fin de Máster se ha utilizado inteligencia artificial generativa como herramienta de apoyo.	SÍ X	NO
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Uso de la IA Generativo

Si tu respuesta ha sido SÍ, contesta a las siguientes preguntas. Si has contestado NO, pasa al apartado 2.

Uso ético

	SÍ	NO
¿A la hora de usar la herramienta IA, en los <i>prompts</i> utilizados has incluido datos de carácter sensible o de carácter personal (fotos de personas reales, datos personales, etc.)? <i>Si tu respuesta es afirmativa especifica cuáles.</i>		X
¿Has orientado tu uso a suplantar tu trabajo personal sin hacer una revisión crítica de la extraído en la herramienta IA? <i>Si tu respuesta es afirmativa especifica cuáles.</i>		X
¿Has tenido en cuenta las recomendaciones académicas que te han hecho específicamente en el Grado/Máster sobre lo que está permitido o no con la IA?	X	

Uso técnico realizado:

¿Qué herramientas has utilizado (ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Nano Banana...)? Especifica la versión o tipo de licencia.

He utilizado ChatGPT en la versión gratuita.

Marcar lo que corresponda:

Generación de texto (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →

- Reformulación (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT Prompt: "This sentence is too dense, help me reformulate it so that what I'm conveying is better understood".
- Traducción / corrección (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →
- Sugerencia de estructura (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →
- Apoyo metodológico (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →
- Buscar o citar bibliografía (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT Prompt: "Cite me in APA format the following links."
- Generar contenido audiovisual (videos, infografías, audios, imágenes, gráficos. *Especifica en concreto qué contenidos has generado con IA además de citarlo correctamente en el trabajo.*)
- Otros (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →

Confirmando que el contenido final ha sido revisado, corregido y validado íntegramente por mí como autor/a y asumo la plena responsabilidad académica del mismo.

La utilización de la IA no ha sustituido el análisis crítico, la reflexión personal ni el trabajo intelectual propio exigido en un TFG/TFM.

Firma:

Elena Portilla Torres a 16 de Junio de 2026, Madrid, España.