

Issues in Australian Foreign Policy: July to December 2021

GABRIELE ABBONDANZA  AND THOMAS S. WILKINS

Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney

The second half of 2021 proved an exacting time for Australian policymakers as they grappled with a range of ongoing and emergent challenges, each severely testing the country's infrastructures, capabilities, and foreign policy horizons. National policy challenges were marked by elements of continuity with the preceding period, juxtaposed with new and unexpected dilemmas. In terms of *relative continuity*, Australia's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic — as outlined in earlier reviews by Agius and Clapton — remained centre-stage, while going through a series of torturous new evolutions.¹ Furthermore, the established trend of degenerating bilateral relations with Australia's primary trading partner, China, continued unabated, with Chinese economic coercion provoking intensified rhetoric on both sides. Set against celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS alliance, it became apparent that Canberra's posture towards China was becoming more 'securitised' across all fronts.

In contrast to these continuities, some *new developments* caught both scholars and analysts off guard. The announcement of a totally unanticipated initiative in the form of the 'AUKUS' (Australia-UK-US) trilateral agreement unveiled a centrepiece deal that committed the United Kingdom and United States — among other things — to assist Australia with the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, and created shockwaves as the existing French deal to provide conventional vessels was unceremoniously jettisoned. Regionally, the South Pacific suffered from both new repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural calamities. In this respect, Australia's role within the 'Pacific Family' was wholly inadequate at the outset of the period under review but considerably more proactive in later months. On the global stage, Australia engaged in remarkably different ways in key forums, namely the G20 and the new United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conferences (Pre-COP26 and COP26),² due to contrasting goals

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¹ William Clapton, "Issues in Australian Foreign Policy January to June 2021," *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 67, 3–4 (2021), pp. 544–58; Christine Agius, "Issues in Australian Foreign Policy July to December 2020," *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 67, 2 (2021), pp. 331–48.

² Oren Gruenbaum, "Commonwealth Update," *The Round Table*, Vol 110, 6 (2021), pp. 635–44; Robyn Eckersley, "'The Australian Way': How Morrison Trashed Brand Australia at COP26," *The Conversation*, 11 November 2021, 6.01am AEDT, Environment + Energy, <https://theconversation.com/the-australian-way-how-morrison-trashed-brand-australia-at-cop26-171670>.

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concerning trade and environmental governance. Australia's traditional middle power statecraft was tested significantly on both occasions, and its reputation suffered when it sought to misalign its policies on climate change mitigation from those of the large part of the international community.

It is against this backdrop that this review focuses on six main elements. First, the article investigates the ongoing repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's security and soft power. Second, it analyses the deteriorating relationship with China. Third, it briefly outlines the reinvigorated relationship with the United States. Fourth, it explores the opportunities and challenges of AUKUS for Australia, also assessing the partnership's reception among ASEAN and European countries. Fifth, it examines the Australian role within the so-called 'Pacific family', with an emphasis on nations that have faced different types of issues in the second half of 2021. Sixth, it probes into the country's expected and actual contributions to the G20 and the Pre-COP26 and COP26 summits, which reveal the respective importance of the economy and the environment in the design of Australia's current foreign policy.

Australia's Continuing Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As will be seen, Australia's national responses to the ongoing pandemic have varied significantly throughout 2020 and 2021 and are consequential for the country's foreign policy.³ Like numerous other countries, Australia restricted all non-essential travel towards the beginning of the pandemic. However, unique among all liberal democracies, Australia also imposed a full travel ban that prevented its own citizens from leaving the country, under any circumstances, with very few exemptions granted at a later stage. Conversely, around 40,000 Australian citizens remained stuck overseas, according to data from a specific Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) registry, more than 50 of whom have died of COVID-19 abroad while not being able to return home.⁴ This was part of the government's so-called 'COVID-zero' policy, which earned the country the grim sobriquets of 'fortress Australia', and what Lester even dubbed the 'hermit kingdom'.⁵ While the Morrison administration stuck to it for nineteen months in total, the latest epidemiological research shows that this stern policy was able to delay the virus' spread in Australia by just one month.⁶

Health security experts have praised some aspects of the country's tough approach to the pandemic, with the TTIQ strategy (testing, tracing, isolation, and quarantine), introduced in the early stages of the emergency when vaccines were not yet available, identified as an example of best practice. Indeed, it should be emphasised that Australia has one of the lowest numbers of COVID-related deaths in the world,⁷ although the role of its unique geography, its extremely low population density, and its low median age must be acknowledged when interpreting these data. However, the country's war-

³ For a full account of Australia's main policies on pandemic containment, see Department of Health, "Restrictions, lockdowns and stay at home orders," 23 December 2021, <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/restrictions-and-lockdowns>.

⁴ Dan Conifer, "Data reveals more than 50 Australian citizens have died from COVID-19 while overseas," *ABC News*, 5 August 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-05/over-50-australian-citizens-died-abroad-from-covid-19/100354220>.

⁵ Amelia Lester, "Australia is the New Hermit Kingdom," *Foreign Policy*, Vol 241 (2021), pp. 3–5.

⁶ Adeshina Adekunle et al., "Delaying the COVID-19 Epidemic in Australia: Evaluating the Effectiveness of International Travel Bans," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol 44, 4 (2020), pp. 257–9.

⁷ World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," 26 January 2022, <https://covid19.who.int>.

like and prolonged isolation — at a time when the international community was promoting the opposite — eventually resulted in a strained reputation within the international community, as the aforementioned grim sobriquets attest. Additionally, Australia has a mixed record in terms of vaccine policy as well, given that it eschewed the design of a coherent immunisation strategy in the first crucial months of the pandemic. In time, the government change its mantra from ‘it’s not a race’ to ‘we go for gold’ and vaccination rates soared in the second half of 2021.⁸ Yet, the initial self-imposed exclusion from the global vaccine rollout unnecessarily cemented the ‘fortress Australia’ policy for a number of months, with Melbourne still holding the unfortunate world record for time spent in lockdown, at the time of writing.⁹

It is therefore unsurprising that such a momentous event strongly impacted on the country’s security and foreign policy. Domestically, Canberra formed the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC; led by the Prime Minister and Cabinet), which coordinated national security responses from a variety of agencies. More specifically: (1) DFAT coordinated the import of medical equipment, sought to assist Australians stranded abroad, and funded several pandemic response plans across the southern Indo-Pacific¹⁰; (2) the Department of Defence (DoD) deployed military and civilian personnel to support the whole-of-government response to COVID-19¹¹; (3) the Department of Health enacted measures from the *National Health Security Act 2007*, the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, and other relevant legislation¹²; and (4) the Department of Home Affairs implemented the stern border control measures mentioned previously through the Australian Border Force.¹³ Both before and during the second half of 2021, the Australian response was not limited to ‘traditional’ areas of security with the *ad hoc* addition of health security, but also comprised measures directed at protecting food, financial, and social security, thus addressing select aspects of human security as well.¹⁴

Internationally, Australia pursued an isolationist path that did not win much favour. On the one hand, the country’s early pursuit of an international inquiry into the origins of the pandemic was received well by the numerous countries that are weary of China’s recent foreign policy turn, and this endeavour fits well with the country’s middle power tradition.¹⁵ On the other, its new isolationism did not help to foster deeper ties with

⁸ Josh Taylor, “From ‘it’s not a race’ to ‘go for gold’: how Scott Morrison pivoted on Australia’s Covid vaccine rollout,” *The Guardian*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jul/29/from-its-not-a-race-to-go-for-gold-how-scott-morrison-pivoted-on-australias-covid-vaccine-rollout>.

⁹ Judd Boaz, “Melbourne passes Buenos Aires’ world record for time spent in COVID-19 lockdown,” *ABC News*, 3 October 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-03/melbourne-longest-lockdown/100510710>.

¹⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “COVID-19 Development Response Plans,” 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/covid-19-development-response-plans>.

¹¹ Department of Defence, “COVID-19 Taskforce,” 2022, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/taskforces/covid-19-taskforce>.

¹² Department of Health, “About the COVID-19 pandemic,” 2022, <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/about>.

¹³ Department of Home Affairs, “COVID-19 and the border,” 2022, <https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au>.

¹⁴ See Parliament of Australia, “COVID-19 Australian Government roles and responsibilities: an overview,” *Research Paper Series 2019–20*, 19 May 2020.

¹⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, “Australia the ‘Good International Citizen’? The Limits of a Traditional Middle Power,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 75, 2 (2021), pp. 178–96; Darren J. Lim and Nathan Attrill, “Australian Debate of the China Question: The COVID-19 Case,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 75, 4 (2021), pp. 410–31.

Indo-Pacific nations, especially in the light of Australia's historical 'liminality' in the region, which awkwardly places it neither fully inside nor outside the region.¹⁶ Since mid-2021, however, vaccine diplomacy was more significantly employed as a result of the wider availability of vaccines for Australian residents. After a poor start,¹⁷ the surplus of AstraZeneca doses was finally redirected towards South Pacific nations experiencing vaccine shortages and logistical issues, along with the deployment of medical and paramedical staff, and the funding of financial assistance schemes. This was done with a view to repair the country's image within the 'Pacific family' and effectively counteract similar Chinese efforts in the southern part of the Indo-Pacific (see below).¹⁸

In essence, it could be argued that the Australian security approach to the COVID-19 pandemic is split between its different outcomes *domestically* and *internationally*. The former can be labelled a 'triumph of sorts', as Wade argues¹⁹ — the relatively few deaths, the mild economic downturn, the effective response after the many initial hesitations — while the latter more closely resemble the 'lost opportunity' according to Wong, who advocated for a markedly more humanitarian and multilateral approach, echoing international criticism.²⁰ Such different viewpoints also help to understand why the government talked of a 'successful response to COVID-19', while analysts have defined the post-2021 lockdown period 'a shambolic mess'.²¹ It therefore seems that Canberra mostly designed its 'foreign policy as domestic politics', as McDonald argued during the Abbott administration,²² and reinstated its traditional (middle power) statecraft only at a later stage.

The Continued Deterioration of Australia-China Relations

In the case of Australian relations with its largest trading partner, China, the relationship continued its downward trajectory. The events leading up to this, such as the undiplomatic call for an international enquiry into COVID-19's origins, the tariff retaliations, and the infamous '14 grievances' ultimatum, were thoroughly documented in the previous two reviews appearing in this journal. Australian commentators reached for choice epithets to describe the antagonistic 'new normal',²³ such as 'death

¹⁶ Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal, "The International Politics of Liminality: Relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 32, 2 (1997), pp. 169–86.

¹⁷ Philippa Nicole Barr, "Australia should scale up its vaccine diplomacy," *The Interpreter*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-should-scale-its-vaccine-diplomacy>.

¹⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia's vaccine response to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/southeast-asia/australias-vaccine-response-covid-19-southeast-asia>.

¹⁹ Fiona Wade, "Australia: a triumph of sorts," in *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*, eds D. Lilleker, I.A. Coman, M. Gregor, E. Novelli (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 99–110.

²⁰ Penny Wong, "The end of Orthodoxy: Australia in a Post-Pandemic World," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Vol 9 (2020), pp. 100–18.

²¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Securing Australia's Recovery: Supporting Australians through COVID-19: Budget 2021-2022, Budget 2021-22* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2021); Kerryn Phelps, "'A shambolic mess': the only example Australia is giving the world now is how not to manage Covid," *The Guardian*, 4 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/04/a-shambolic-mess-the-only-example-australia-is-giving-the-world-now-is-how-not-to-manage-covid>.

²² Matt McDonald, "Australian Foreign Policy under the Abbott Government: Foreign Policy as Domestic Politics?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 69, 6 (2015), pp. 651–69.

²³ Ye Xue quoted in Erin Handley, "Australia-China relations continued to sour in 2021. What can we expect in 2022?" *ABC News*, 29 December 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-29/australia-china-relations-in-2022-tensions-trade-rights-olympics/100719632>.

spiral',²⁴ while Chinese media characterised relations as being at their 'lowest ebb'.²⁵ All manner of ministerial contacts of economic dialogues were suspended, leaving little scope for communication.

What the period under review emphatically demonstrated, if further proof were needed, is that the 'compartmentalisation' of trade (China) and security (the United States) in Australian strategic policy is now untenable. Attempts to 'hedge' between Australia's primary trading and security partners proved unrealisable for several reasons.²⁶ First, China's more muscular security ambitions in the region were fast becoming pressing strategic concerns for Canberra. Its rapid military modernisation, ramped-up pressure on its neighbours in Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas, were viewed as alarming challenges to the rules-based order Canberra has sworn to uphold. Second, human rights' concerns towards Beijing's treatment of the Uighur people and the imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong clashed with Australia's own national values, and finally resulted in the announcement of a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Third, the Chinese government's persistent use of economic coercion in diplomatic disputes left no doubt that the long-feared 'weaponisation' of trade was here to stay,²⁷ and led to China being increasingly portrayed as an economic-security 'threat' to Australia, as well as a potentially more diffuse military-security threat in the region. A gradual process of economic 'decoupling' from China, through trade diversification, seeking out alternative supply chains, or building niche national resiliencies, designed to safeguard national sovereignty, progressed. Perhaps surprisingly, however, a DoD review into the national security implications of Chinese contractor Landbridge Group's lease of the strategic Port of Darwin found no reason to nullify the contract. China's unexpected request for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP 11) on 17 September (a day after the AUKUS announcement), was seen as a form of affront, given that Australia was subject to economic coercion and had filed numerous claims to the World Trade Organization (WTO), disputing Chinese economic actions.

Thus, the period under review saw the accelerated process of 'securitisation' of the China relationship by the Coalition government across all spheres. But this trajectory was not without domestic controversy. Secretary for Home Affairs Michael Pezzullo's 'drums of war' speech in the preceding period continued to reverberate months later.²⁸ Defence Minister Dutton further teased out the government's position towards a Taiwan conflict, claiming that it was 'inconceivable' that Australia would not support US forces engaged in a Taiwan Strait contingency.²⁹ The argument of the 'hawks' was that judging Chinese actions as a whole, the possibility of conflict could not be blithely

²⁴ Pichamon Yeophantong quoted in Handley, "Australia-China relations continued to sour in 2021."

²⁵ Xu Keyue, "China-Australia diplomatic ties may worsen due to anti-China rhetoric for 2022 Aussie election: experts," *Global Times*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243061.shtml>.

²⁶ Thomas Wilkins, "Middle power hedging in the era of security/economic disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the 'Special Strategic Partnership'," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab023>.

²⁷ Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracy Beattie, *The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), pp. 4–23.

²⁸ Thomas Wilkins, "Australia's war drum to nowhere on Taiwan," *East Asia Forum*, 11 June 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/11/australias-war-drum-to-nowhere-on-taiwan/>.

²⁹ "Dutton's grim warning over Taiwan 'spot on', says PM," *The Australian Financial Review*, 28 November 2021, <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/dutton-s-grim-warning-over-taiwan-spot-on-pm-20211128-p59cxy>.

ruled out, no matter how unpalatable, and that greater preparedness was key in deterring or responding to such a contingency. Conversely, Labor politicians ('doves'?), such as Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong, lambasted Dutton's bellicose comments claiming that by discarding any sense of 'strategic ambiguity', he was 'wildly out of step with the strategy long adopted by Australia and our principal ally'.³⁰ This continued the opposition's criticism of 'a litany of cases of the Morrison-Joyce government seeking to use foreign policy and national security for political advantage'.³¹ Former Labor PM Kevin Rudd also joined the debate on Twitter, tweeting that 'Dutton is like a petulant teenager, spoiling for war with China because he thinks it makes him look tough',³² while former PM Paul Keating weighed-in in his own inimitable style, as mentioned later in this review.

Beijing's response was to claim that Australian politicians were hyping the 'China threat theory'. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian claimed that '[s]uch behaviour is deeply irresponsible and unpopular'. Despite the efforts of the Australia-China Relations Institute and the (quiet) inauguration of the CEO of the Foundation for Australia-China Relations by DFAT, their more positive and measured perspectives on China appear to have gained little traction with either government or the general public, although a recently published book by Brophy provided a more nuanced diagnosis of the relationship.³³ In such a context, it is difficult to see a way out of the Australia-China diplomatic impasse in the short- or mid-term. As Maude argues, '[t]here are no signs Xi intends to reflect on the role of China's own behaviour in feeding insecurity in the region, or to adjust course'.³⁴ The same appeared true of the government in Canberra during this period. Clapton's statement in a previous review, that 'the Morrison government has shown no inclination to accept Chinese behaviour or adjust Australia's own behaviour or policies in response to Chinese economic coercion', held true for the remainder of the year.³⁵

Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of ANZUS

In the case of Australia's relations with its long-standing security ally, the United States, things took a modest turn for the better as the allies celebrated the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty (1 September 1951). A series of commemorative events in both countries offered the opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the past and the mutual challenges the allies faced into the future. Dedicated publications were issued by the United States Studies Centre (USSC) and Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) charting the history and publicising cooperation present and future.³⁶ In addition to this fanfare, on 16 September Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Payne and Defence Minister Dutton met with US Secretary of State Blinken

³⁰ Anthony Galloway, "Penny Wong says government 'wildly out of step' with the US on Taiwan," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/government-wildly-out-of-step-with-the-us-on-taiwan-wong-20211122-p59ay9.html>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Dutton's grim warning over Taiwan 'spot on', says PM," *The Australian Financial Review*, 28 November 2021. <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/dutton-s-grim-warning-over-taiwan-spot-on-pm-20211128-p59cty>.

³³ Peter Brophy, *China Panic: Australia's Alternative to Paranoia and Pandering* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2021).

³⁴ Richard Maude, "Australia's AUKUS Gambit," *Asia Society*, 16 September 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/australia/australias-aukus-gambit>.

³⁵ Clapton, "Issues in Australian Foreign Policy January to June 2021," p. 9.

³⁶ United States Study Centre, *The Alliance at 70* (Sydney: United States Study Centre, 2021); Patrick Walters, ed., *ANZUS at 70: The Past, Present and Future of the Alliance* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2021).

and Secretary of Defense Austin in Washington DC for the 31st Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN). Consequently, a joint statement underscored the importance of the bilateral relation and the convergence of regional policies.³⁷ The allies essentially reaffirmed their cooperation towards ‘an open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific region’, and listed a wide spectrum of joint areas of interest and collaborative initiatives, the most significant of these being AUKUS (see below).³⁸

With the tumultuous Trump Presidency beginning to fade from view (notwithstanding a possible reprise in 2024), the alliance appears to have settled back to ‘business as usual’. Strategic commentators were quite sanguine about the alliance’s health (with New Zealand’s absence politely unnoticed), with a determined joint focus on the Indo-Pacific region, increased deployments of US assets and personnel in Australia, a build-up in Australia’s indigenous capabilities (as per guidelines in the 2020 Strategic Defence Update), and validating rhetoric as noted above.³⁹ There is no question that Australia is augmenting its security ties with the United States, yet remained disappointed that Washington has not moved significantly to the existing architecture of regional economic governance, leaving Australia to participate in the TPP 11 and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) without US membership. Likewise, Morrison faced alliance pressure on Australia’s recalcitrant stance towards climate policy (see below). One theme that stood out from the AUSMIN communique, however, was the need for the alliance partners to forge additional cooperative endeavours, which is where AUKUS, the Quad (and Quad Plus) enter the picture.

AUKUS and the Shift Towards New Minilateral Partnerships

Perhaps the biggest surprise and seminal foreign policy event of the period under review was the signing of a new enhanced strategic partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS). PM Morrison met with his British and US counterparts (virtually) on the 16 September to unveil the agreement on trilateral collaboration to provide Australia with a nuclear-powered submarine flotilla.⁴⁰ Indeed, it certainly came as a surprise to the French who thought they were providing Australia’s submarine contract, as signed in 2016 with France’s Naval Group. Stung by the lack of prior high-level consultation and dismayed at the loss of the ‘contract of the century’, French President Macron was suitably livid with Canberra. An almighty diplomatic stoush followed in which French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian pronounced AUKUS as a ‘stab in the back’.⁴¹ Former Labor PM Kevin Rudd even took the unusual step of penning a piece for the French newspaper *Le Monde* in which he also deplored the fashion in which Canberra broke the news to

³⁷ US Department of State, *Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2021*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2021/>.

³⁸ US Department of State, *Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2021*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2021/>.

³⁹ Sam Roggeveen, “Will ANZUS make it to 80?” *The Interpreter*, 1 September 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/will-anzus-make-it-80>.

⁴⁰ Hon. Scott Morrison, Rt. Hon. Boris Johnson, and Joseph R. Biden, Jr, “Joint leaders statement on AUKUS,” *Media Release*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-leaders-statement-aukus>.

⁴¹ Eglantine Staunton, “AUKUS: France’s strategic outcry,” *The Interpreter*, 24 September 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-france-s-strategic-outcry>.

Paris.⁴² The dispute reached a personal climax when Mr Morrison publicly released a text message exchange with Macron and a chilly discussion occurred at the G20 summit (see below).

At the heart of the AUKUS agreement was the trilateral commitment to engage in technological collaboration to build a nuclear-powered submarine flotilla to replace the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) aging *Collins* class of conventionally powered (diesel-electric) boats. Anglo-American assistance with the provision of a superior nuclear-propelled submarine was deemed to outclass the — already highly troubled — original French commitment to supply conventional boats. The parties commissioned a (subsequently fast-tracked) 12–18-month feasibility study to determine the exact specifications of the future Australian vessel design, with the existing US *Virginia* class and UK *Astute* class boats considered to meet Australian specifications most closely. Assurances were made that the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (Australia has no operational nuclear power plants), would not be nuclear-armed, nor breach nuclear-non-proliferation agreements. Significant concerns were raised over the feasibility of the whole program, in particular the long lead-times involved in procuring and eventually deploying the capability, with many estimates running to 2040.⁴³ The submarine deal, and AUKUS more broadly, seems set to remain an area of controversy going forward.

As the dust settled on the diplomatic altercation between the parties involved, analysts began to examine the actual content of the AUKUS agreement more closely, looking into the implications beyond the nuclear-submarine deal which occupied the limelight. A closer inspection of the agreement text reveals a wider and highly ambitious agenda to 'significantly deepen cooperation on a range of security and defence capabilities' to be achieved through 'deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains', concomitantly indicating an *economic* component to the security partnership.⁴⁴ To wit, this agreement potentially locks Australia into a full spectrum of trilateral security-economic initiatives into the future, what Mr Morrison dubbed optimistically — or ominously — the 'forever partnership'.⁴⁵ In essence, AUKUS ought to be interpreted as further expanding and reinforcing the wider range of defence networks Australia has built with allies and partners in order to respond to the challenges of a more volatile Indo-Pacific security environment.⁴⁶

Debates in Australia as to the wisdom or not of the AUKUS move soon emerged. Arguments in favour of the government considered Mr Morrison's feat of binding the United States and United Kingdom closer to Australian security as a significant achievement, since Australia is unwilling to shoulder the full burden of defence 'self-

⁴² Kevin Rudd, "'La décision de Canberra sur les sous-marins aggrave les tensions stratégiques en Asie du Sud-Est': l'avertissement de Kevin Rudd, ancien premier ministre australien," *Le Monde*, 21 September 2021.

⁴³ Marcus Hellyer, "No room for delay in Australia's transition to nuclear-powered submarines," *The Strategist*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/no-room-for-delay-in-australias-transition-to-nuclear-powered-submarines/>.

⁴⁴ Morrison, Johnson, and Biden, "Joint leaders statement on AUKUS."

⁴⁵ Sarah Basford Canales, Harley Dennett, and Miriam Webber, "Australia, Britain and US form 'forever partnership' with AUKUS trilateral technology-sharing security deal," *The Canberra Times*, 16 September 2021 <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7432504/pm-all-in-on-forever-deal-with-us-uk-for-nuclear-run-subs/>.

⁴⁶ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Whither the Indo-Pacific? Middle Power Strategies from Australia, South Korea and Indonesia," *International Affairs*, Vol 98, 2 (2022), pp. 403–21.

reliance' (i.e. 3.5–4 per cent of GDP on defence spending).⁴⁷ Opposition leader (and soon to be Prime Minister) Anthony Albanese, gave tacit support, indicating an almost traditional measure of bipartisanship on defence affairs, if not on the modalities of responding to China. Such arguments also illustrated Australia's limited capacity, as a middle power, to keep pace with disruptive emerging defence technologies (EDT) without external collaboration. The AUKUS commitment to trilateral cooperation on 'cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities' aims to address this shortfall.⁴⁸ As Kelly points out, '[t]hese are decisive gains in a world where future conflict will be heavily high-tech'.⁴⁹

For others it was deemed a regrettable move. Among the domestic criticism it attracted, the viewpoint of former Labor PM Paul Keating drew the most attention, claiming that in the face of a dominant China, 'Eight submarines against China in 20 years' time will be like throwing a handful of toothpicks at the mountain'.⁵⁰ He considered AUKUS an 'ignominious' example of 'trying to find our security from Asia rather than in Asia'. He added that Australia effectively had 'no vital interest' in the security of Taiwan in contradiction to Dutton's earlier comments. To this point, a certain amount of critique focussed on the 'Anglosphere' optics of AUKUS, at odds with 'Asian engagement', with implied connotations of Australia's shameful 'White Australia' policy of the past. Government ministers moved quickly to quash Keating's objections, with Minister Payne pointing out that AUKUS was just one of Australia's policy platforms for responding to the Indo-Pacific, with the Quad (containing Japan and India) and the Quad Plus, in addition to its involvement in ASEAN-lead multilateral architecture.⁵¹

Regional reactions to the stunning announcement were as diverse as the Indo-Pacific region itself. Naturally, Beijing unleashed another bout of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' and veiled threats with the claim that the agreement would destabilise the region through nuclear proliferation and denouncing it as a 'tripartite alliance'.⁵² Japanese officials have formally welcomed AUKUS in respect to its tightening of the US alliance and UK engagement with the Indo-Pacific, but ponder how this will affect Quad cooperation.⁵³ India meanwhile remains ambivalent, for similar reasons, as well as its potential capacity to antagonise China in the maritime sphere. ASEAN countries provided a range of diverse responses.⁵⁴ Broadly speaking some have been sceptical, such as

⁴⁷ See Hugh White, *How to Defend Australia* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ Morrison, Johnson, and Biden, "Joint leaders statement on AUKUS."

⁴⁹ Paul Kelly, "The biggest strategy shift of our lifetime," *The Weekend Australian*, 18–19 September 2021.

⁵⁰ Karen Barlow, "Former PM Paul Keating lashes the 'ignominy' of the AUKUS deal and why Labor's going along with it," *Canberra Times*, 10 November 2021, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7505467/lost-their-way-paul-keating-levels-the-major-parties-on-foreign-policy/>.

⁵¹ Marise Payne, "Paul Keating is wrong, AUKUS doesn't turn Australia's back on Asia," Media Release, 27 September 2021, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/paul-keating-is-wrong-aukus-doesn-t-turn-australia-s-back-on-asia-20210926-p58usz.html>.

⁵² Deng Xiaoci, "China warns against AUKUS, to make meetings routine with Pacific island countries, enhancing ties to higher level," *Global Times*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236961.shtml>.

⁵³ Michael Smith, "Japan wants in on AUKUS," *The Australian Financial Review*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/japan-wants-in-on-aukus-20211119-p59aha>.

⁵⁴ Abhijit Singh, "India remains divided about AUKUS," *The Interpreter*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-remains-divided-about-aukus>.

Indonesia, while others more positive, such as the Philippines, while ASEAN itself is worried about how such minilaterals affect ASEAN's 'centrality'.⁵⁵

Extra-regional responses show similarly varied reactions and viewpoints. While the European Union kept neutral tones, AUKUS was introduced just one day before Brussels had already scheduled to unveil its own Indo-Pacific strategy (which ended up being overshadowed), and thus the announcement was not warmly received.⁵⁶ Indeed, commentators have argued that a more effective policy integration with the EU as a whole, as well as with countries that have already launched Indo-Pacific policies (France, and more recently Germany and the Netherlands), and countries with large navies and substantial economic interests in the region (chiefly Italy and Spain) who are in the process of creating one, might result in a viable compromise between the diverging positions of 'hawks' and 'doves'.⁵⁷

But while the path-breaking AUKUS agreement gathered the most attention in this period, other minilaterals such as the Quad, quietly hummed along in the background. Indeed, alongside AUKUS, the Australia-United States-Japan-India Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue or 'Quad' now appears to have become one of the most prominent examples of Canberra's new minilateral push. On 24 September, the Quad leaders met in person in Washington DC to reiterate their joint commitment to 'promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond'.⁵⁸ At the same time, the joint communique chiefly concentrated on more 'non-traditional' security issues. Among these, cooperation on COVID-19 through the Quad Vaccine Experts Group and COVAX program (see above), climate security (see above), emerging technologies (including space and cyber security), and infrastructure development and supply chains, featured prominently. As interest grows in minilateral configurations in Australia and around the region, additional partners have signalled interest in the Quad (the 'Quad Plus') and, perhaps in due course, for AUKUS ('AUKUS Plus').

Australia and the 'Pacific Family'

The second half of 2021 was riddled with complex challenges for the Pacific sub-region. Pacific Island Countries (PICs) faced significant issues, including the many ongoing problems caused by COVID-19, domestic instability, important political developments, major regional and global summits with a direct impact on the region, and natural disasters.⁵⁹ Amidst this delicate regional landscape, Australia followed a similar path to that of its pandemic management, that is ostracising itself from the region at first, only to hurriedly but substantially engage with it at a later stage. Canberra's heightened involvement with the oceanic sectors of the Indo-Pacific stems from its 2017 'Pacific Step-up' policy, upgraded to a 'new chapter in relations with our

⁵⁵ Dino Patti Djalal, "ASEAN responses to AUKUS security dynamic," *East Asia Forum*, 28 November 2021,

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/28/asean-responses-to-aukus-security-dynamic/>.

⁵⁶ European Union External Action, "EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," 16 September 2021, <https://europa.eu/!HN43qM>.

⁵⁷ Gabriele Abbondanza, "The AUKUS Partnership: A Wake-up Call for Europe," *IAI Commentaries*, Vol 21, 53 (2021), pp. 1–5.

⁵⁸ Prime Minister of Australia Hon. Scott Morrison, "Quad Leaders' Summit Communique," Media Release, 24 September 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/quad-leaders-summit-communique>.

⁵⁹ Kerry Baker, "History repeats itself in 2021 for the Pacific Islands," *East Asia Forum*, 15 January 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/15/history-repeats-itself-in-2021-for-the-pacific-islands>.

Pacific family' in 2018.⁶⁰ Following the policy's principles and means, Australia eventually engaged with the many regional issues in a variety of ways — chiefly through humanitarian and development aid, with a view to bolster PICs' sovereign resilience capabilities and promote closer bilateral ties. The major developments in the region are concisely recounted below in chronological order.

Samoa's unexpected turmoil following its April elections, which led a politically stable nation to a hung parliament and months-long protests until the end of July, spurred Australian Ministers Payne and Seselja to urge all parties to cooperate.⁶¹ Throughout this period, Australia continued to supply its pandemic support and development aid under the existing partnership.⁶² In October, Papua New Guinea's precarious management of the pandemic, already impeded by vaccine inequality and some of the world's lowest vaccination rates, further worsened.⁶³ As a result, Australia strengthened its anti-pandemic support in addition to the many partnerships that were already in place.⁶⁴ In November, a peaceful protest over the decision of the Solomon Islands' government to recognise China over Taiwan became violent — further exacerbated by foreign interferences — and the government requested Australian support in the form of military, police, and civilian personnel, along with the ongoing pandemic and development aid as per the several partnerships in place.⁶⁵ In December, New Caledonia underwent its third independence referendum in four years, leaving the country deeply divided once again.⁶⁶ Canberra acknowledged the results — the rejection of independence — and continued to work closely with Nouméa in terms of pandemic, security, environmental, and social cooperation.⁶⁷ Throughout 2021, Australia kept providing development and pandemic assistance to Tonga, which would eventually be joined by disaster relief after the January 2022 volcanic eruption and subsequent tsunami.⁶⁸ Lastly, in the latter half of 2021 Canberra cooperated with more than 20 PICs and related regional fora along the lines of

⁶⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Stepping-up Australia's engagement with our Pacific family," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/stepping-up-australias-pacific-engagement>.

⁶¹ Hon. Zed Seselja and Hon. Marise Payne, "Statement on the political situation in Samoa," Media Release, 26 June 2021, <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/zed-seselja/media-release/statement-political-situation-samoa>.

⁶² Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia's development partnership with Samoa," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/samoa/development-assistance>.

⁶³ Chris McCall, "Disrupted Care in Papua New Guinea: The Harms of COVID-19," *The Lancet*, Vol 399, 10321 (2022), pp. 226–7.

⁶⁴ Hon. Marise Payne, Hon. Peter Dutton, and Hon. Zed Seselja, "COVID-19 partnership with Papua New Guinea strengthened," Media Release, 27 October 2021, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/covid-19-partnership-papua-new-guinea-strengthened>.

⁶⁵ Hon. Zed Seselja et al., "Solomon Islands," Media Release, 25 November 2021, <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/zed-seselja/media-release/solomon-islands>; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia's development partnership with Solomon Islands," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/development-assistance/development-assistance-in-solomon-islands>.

⁶⁶ Jon Fraenkel, "New Caledonian independence still far from settled," *East Asia Forum*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/12/20/new-caledonian-independence-still-far-from-settled>.

⁶⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Stepping-up in New Caledonia," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/new-caledonia/stepping-up-in-new-caledonia>.

⁶⁸ See Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Stepping-up in Tonga," 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tonga/stepping-up-in-tonga>.

what has been described above, thus reinstating its active engagement with the ‘Pacific family’,⁶⁹ previously weakened by Australia’s self-imposed isolation in the early-to-mid-stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and its stance on climate change.

This complex web of bilateral relations is joined by the country’s foreign aid program, which comes on top of bilateral agreements. In nominal terms, the 2021–2022 budget allocated around 4.3 billion Australian dollars, with a slight decrease compared to the previous financial year. However, in terms of the country’s official development assistance (ODA) as a proportion of gross national income (GNI), Australia has just reached an all-time low at 0.21 per cent. This not only is the lowest figure in the past 60 years, but it is also about 50 per cent below the average among OECD countries (0.32 per cent), as shown by Clare.⁷⁰ The continuing cuts to Australian foreign aid, initiated in 2014, have impacted on all the main global regions with the exception of the Pacific. This policy of regional exceptionalism has allowed Australia to remain the Pacific’s largest donor, both promoting its *primus inter pares* role and countering China’s growing influence in the region.⁷¹

As a result, the many humanitarian and political challenges affecting Australia’s immediate neighbourhood (and sphere of interest) allow for some considerations. On the one hand, Canberra’s ‘Pacific step-up’ policy and ‘Pacific family’ discourse are emblematic of its self-identification — and possibly external perception — as a ‘big brother’ within the region’s ‘family’, as discussed some twenty-five years ago by Smyth, Plange, and Burdess.⁷² On the other, there are several contradictions with the Australian role in the region. Many of these are explored by Wallis, including its isolationism during the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategic connotations attached to the Indo-Pacific (which makes its engagement in the South Pacific not disinterested), and its controversial attitude to climate change mitigation.⁷³ With such premises, Canberra might choose to revisit the ‘Blue Pacific’ concept. First officially articulated at the 2017 meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum’s (PIF) leaders, it highlights the ocean as both the ideational and the practical focal point around which PICs design and implement their domestic and foreign policies.⁷⁴ Being the country with the third-largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) on the planet — also thanks to its maritime boundaries — Australia could join the ‘Blue Pacific’ discourse not only as another means of

⁶⁹ See Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Pacific Step-up,” 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific>.

⁷⁰ Angela Clare, “2021–22 foreign aid budget,” *Parliament of Australia*, 7 June 2021, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview202122/ForeignAidBudget.

⁷¹ The Lowy Institute, “Australian Foreign Aid,” 2022, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/issues/australian-foreign-aid>.

⁷² Rosaleen Smyth, Nii-K. Plange, and Neil Burdess, “Big Brother? Australia’s Image in the South Pacific,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 51, 1 (1997), pp. 37–52.

⁷³ Joanne Wallis, “Contradictions in Australia’s Pacific Islands discourse,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 75, 5 (2021), pp. 487–506; Matt McDonald, “After the Fires: Climate Change and Security in Australia,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 56, 1 (2021), pp. 1–18.

⁷⁴ Hon. Tuilaepa Lufesoliai Sialele Malielegaoi, “Opening Address by Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sialele Malielegaoi of Samoa,” *Pacific Islands Forum*, Speech, 5 September 2017, <https://www.forumsec.org/2017/09/05/opening-address-prime-minister-tuilaepa-sialele-malielegaoi-samoa-open-48th-pacific-islands-forum-2017>.

advancing its interests in the region, but, equally importantly, to foster substantially closer ties with neighbouring PICs that have already spearheaded this approach.⁷⁵

Australia on the World Stage: The Economy and the Environment

The Australian role at three of the most significant summits of 2021 is emblematic of its international priorities and foreign policy trajectory, albeit for different reasons. The first one is the G20 summit held in Italy (Rome) on 30 and 31 October, which was organised against the complex backdrop of a disrupted multilateralism due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, former US President Trump's distrust of the G20 itself, and a number of regional and global frictions.⁷⁶ Canberra has a tradition of pragmatic approaches to the governance of the international economy and trade, and it therefore provided a contribution in line with both this tradition and the government's current agenda. In a detailed document, it outlined what the country had done and was continuing to do in order to comply with the many ambitious goals of the G20. On the one hand, it should not surprise that Australia worked swiftly to implement policies revolving around global trade and international COVID-19 relief, correcting the previous isolation of the early-to-mid-stages of the pandemic. On the other, in the light of what has been explored in the earlier section on COVID-19 management, it is equally unsurprising that Canberra chose not to comply in time with the G20 goal of gradually and safely restoring international travel.⁷⁷ On the contrary, it retained its controversial policies comprising the outbound travel ban and caps on international arrivals, allowing only for select types of exemption.⁷⁸ Moreover, the G20 ended on an embarrassing note for PM Morrison, when French President Macron responded to a journalist's question on whether he thought the Australian leader had lied about AUKUS to him by replying 'I don't think, I know'.⁷⁹

The second meeting was the Pre-COP26 summit also held in Italy (Milan) between 30 September and 2 October, which paved the way for the third key international summit, the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), held in the United Kingdom (Glasgow) between 30 October and 12 November.⁸⁰ Both started with significant doubts over the commitment of the 197 attending parties, with anxieties that had been

⁷⁵ For more information on EEZs and their maritime boundaries, see International Institute for Law of the Sea Studies, "Exclusive economic zone (EEZ) map of the world," 23 May 2021, <http://iilss.net/exclusive-economic-zoneeez-map-of-the-world>.

⁷⁶ Like all global summits, the Italian G20 received mixed reactions. On the plus side, it delivered a 15 per cent global minimum tax on multinationals, it supported the restoration of global supply chains, it strengthened dialogue with a number of African nations, and it promoted the 'One Health' approach to more sustainably prevent and fight future pandemics. On the minus side, it was not able to address growing frictions with China and Russia, and it provided a lukewarm contribution to climate change mitigation. See Ettore Greco, "The Italian G20 Presidency: A Post-Summit Assessment," *IAI Commentaries*, Vol 21, 55 (2021), pp. 1–6.

⁷⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia's implementation of G20 actions to support world trade and investment response to COVID-19," August 2021, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/organisations/g20/australias-implementation-g20-actions-support-world-trade-and-investment-response-covid-19>.

⁷⁸ For most Australian states and territories, this would change after November 2021.

⁷⁹ Associated Press, "The Latest: Macron says Australia's Morrison lied to him," 1 November 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-g-20-summit-business-europe-rome-875fb9e8f3b085001ed9641f0b365e93>.

⁸⁰ UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021, "The UK-Italy partnership," 2021, <https://ukcop26.org/pre-cop>.

fuelled by the disputed approach to climate change mitigation shown at the G20.⁸¹ At the two conferences, Australia joined countries like China, Russia, and India in resisting global calls to phase out carbon, and was ranked last among sixty countries by the latest Climate Transparency Report.⁸² From an official viewpoint, the Australian government was satisfied with the outcome of COP26 and highlighted the initiatives it did support, while reminding everyone of the importance of the coal industry for the country's more rural areas.⁸³

The G20 and the Pre-COP26/COP26 summits therefore shed a light on Australia's current priorities and foreign policy trajectory in a post-pandemic world. The country's engagement with global economic and trade policies is substantial and continuing, drawing on a solid foreign policy tradition based on consensus-building and thus typical of its 'pragmatic' middle power diplomacy, as Taylor described it.⁸⁴ Conversely, Canberra's controversial but unwavering stance on environmental issues stems from its comparative advantage in sourcing minerals and coal it has in abundance and it is able to export to the many rising economies of Asia. The Morrison administration interprets global calls for more sustainable approaches as impositions of an international bureaucratic superstructure that curbs states' sovereignty,⁸⁵ according to the Prime Minister's understanding of 'negative globalism', as Gyngell recalls.⁸⁶ In turn, scholars such as Price argue that this leads to a 'norm erosion' on the Australian part,⁸⁷ which adds to what Strating defined Australia's 'exemptionalism'⁸⁸ and to Abbondanza's assessment of the country's 'neutral international citizenship' (as opposed to 'good').⁸⁹

Conclusion

Australian foreign policy makers faced a bewildering array of challenges during the period under review, and their responses were marked by differing degrees of success, all accompanied by vociferous domestic and international debate. Some of the challenges were ongoing, such as the effective but controversial management of

⁸¹ The COP26 summit eventually resulted in the Glasgow Climate Pact, which commits to a reduction of coal usage but with a considerably weaker roadmap and consensus than anticipated. See Thomas Burelli et al., "We were at COP26: it had mixed results," *The Conversation*, 30 November 2021, 5.19am AEDT, Politics + Society, <https://theconversation.com/we-were-at-cop26-it-had-mixed-results-172558>.

⁸² Charis Chang, "Australia ranked one of the worst G20 countries for climate change policy," *News.com.au*, 14 October 2021, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/environment/climate-change/australia-ranked-one-of-the-worst-g20-countries-for-climate-change-policy/news-story/16e4aae95de509e451d3ee6e4c4df1a6>.

⁸³ Hon. Angus Taylor, "Australia Welcomes Positive Outcomes at COP26," *Media Release*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/taylor/media-releases/australia-welcomes-positive-outcomes-cop26>.

⁸⁴ Brendan Taylor, "Is Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy an illusion?" *International Affairs*, Vol 96, 1 (2020), pp. 95–109.

⁸⁵ Canberra applies the same lens of 'negative globalism' to pandemic management, refugee policies, and select other policies at odds with 'good international citizenship'.

⁸⁶ Allan Gyngell, "Scott Morrison strikes an anxious and inward-looking tone", *The Interpreter*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/scott-morrison-lowy-lecture>.

⁸⁷ Megan Price, "Norm erosion and Australia's challenge to the rules-based order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 75, 2 (2021), pp. 161–77.

⁸⁸ Rebecca Strating, "Enabling authoritarianism in the Indo-Pacific: Australian exemptionalism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 74, 3 (2020), pp. 301–21.

⁸⁹ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Australia the 'good international citizen'? The limits of a traditional middle power," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 75, 2 (2021), pp. 178–96.

COVID-19 and the antagonistic relationship towards China, which became increasingly 'securitised' under the Coalition's approach. With regards to new issues, the surprising AUKUS agreement injected a major new policy platform in response to the deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, Australia's approach to the Pacific Islands followed a similar path to that of pandemic management: 'disengaging' the country from its region at first, only to hurriedly remedy Australia's faltering influence in the region with a comprehensive form of engagement with South Pacific nations. At the same time, Canberra's performance in key international fora such as the G20 and the Pre-COP26/COP26 is emblematic of its priorities in the formulation of a post-pandemic foreign policy: trade continues to rank high, whereas climate change mitigation still lags behind.

Several key considerations can be drawn from Australian foreign and security policy in the second part of 2021. The securitisation of health, long discussed in theory, can provide remarkably effective results, albeit at substantial social and geopolitical costs if coupled with isolationism. A similarly securitised approach to worsening Sino-Australian relations has placed Canberra even closer to Washington, thus ending any speculation of 'hedging its bets' by keeping alternative pathways open. Whether this is the best course for the country's foreign policy in the long-term remains the subject of earnest debate. Despite the prominence of AUKUS and the US alliance, Australia has been proactive in championing other regional minilaterals, with the Quad (Plus), exemplary of this new emphasis. This may be seen as a way of expanding Australia's middle power influence at a time when the country's resources are stretched; a problem further exacerbated by chronic underinvestment in DFAT.⁹⁰ Moreover, and related, there is a relative diminution in Australia's once-lauded soft power — COVID-related travel bans, climate policy recalcitrance, recent and new defence agreements (Quad/Quad Plus and AUKUS) — which came with bad press regionally and globally, and it remains to be seen if or how quickly such standing can be recovered. As the country seems to conduct its 'foreign policy as domestic politics' once more, it follows that some of these trends could change in the event of a future administration guided by a Labor politician, although bipartisanship is often found in the country's foreign policy. In either cases, the current regional and global trajectory of Australian statecraft has enjoyed bilateral support on most issues so far, and a drastic shift therefore seems unlikely at this stage.

⁹⁰ Melissa Conley Tyler and Mitchell Vandewerdt-Holman, "Australia's incredible shrinking Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade," *Pursuit*, 18 October 2019, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/australia-s-incredible-shrinking-department-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade>.