

## An Analysis of Australia's National Defence Strategy 2024

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On 17 April 2024, the Australian government unveiled two seminal documents. The first was its “National Defence Strategy 2024” (NDS-2024), while the second was the “Integrated Investment Program 2024” (IIP-2024). The NDS builds upon the findings of the “Defence Strategic Review 2023” (DSR-2023) and positions the country as a “*middle-power maritime nation*”<sup>1</sup> with its own distinct national interests. In common with many countries of the western Pacific, Australia, too, has sought to tie its economic growth to trade with China while sustaining its security from robust engagement with the United States of America (US). The process of analysis of the Australian NDS-2024 undertaken in this article begins by tracing the changes undertaken by the Australian government to enhance the country’s defence within the Indo-Pacific and then exploring its implications for the Australia-India dyad. It is important to acknowledge that the NDS-2024 directly addresses concerns that had been identified in the DSR-2023,<sup>2</sup> and provides a roadmap to meet these challenges. **Table 1** illustrates this:

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government, Department of Defence, 2024, “Australian National Defence Strategy 2024”, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, Department of Defence, “National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023”, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>.

Ser	Concerns Highlighted in DSR-2023	Approach Adopted by NDS-2024
1.	Reduced Strategic Warning Time	Increased focus upon the national intelligence community and “persistent situational awareness”
2.	Obsolete Force Model	Investment of A\$ 42.1 billion on defence, especially submarines and their supporting infrastructure over the next decade. This signifies a strategic decision to prioritise a critical maritime capability.
3.	Workforce Challenges	Planned increase in defence workforce funding, from A\$ 17.1 billion to A\$ 25.2 billion, in recognition of the importance of a skilled workforce for maintaining and operating military capabilities.
4.	Limited long-range strike capabilities	IIP-24 clearly lists the investments that would be made by the Australian government to enhance long-range strike capabilities for the RAN, the RAAF, and the Royal Australian Army.
5.	Undersea warfare vulnerabilities	NDS-24 prioritises investments in submarines, the surface fleet, and collaboration under AUKUS to enhance undersea warfare capabilities.
6.	Inadequate air and missile defence	Australia plans to manufacture its own “Guided Multiple-Launch Rocket System” missiles, starting in 2025, to reduce reliance on foreign suppliers and strengthen its domestic missile defence capabilities.
7.	Reliance on foreign-produced munitions	NDS-24 prioritises domestic production of select weapons and a secure supply chain.

**Table 1**

Source: Compiled by Author

From **Table 1**, it is clear that an attempt has, indeed, been made by the Australian government to address the concerns raised by the DSR-2023. Limited budgetary resources necessitate prioritisation, reflecting the Australian government’s clearly defined strategic objectives.

### **Objectives of NDS-2024**

The main stated objective is *“to deter any actions that could lead to conflict, military coercion or direct action against Australia or our interests”*. To attain this objective, Australia has employed a *“strategy of denial”*<sup>6</sup> in five domains, namely, maritime, land, air, space and cyber. Deterrence has now become the primary strategic defence objective of Australia. By deterring conflict, Australia aims to prevent the

<sup>3</sup> This “Strategy of Denial” aims to discourage conflict before it starts, preventing potential adversaries from using force against Australia, *Australian National Defence Strategy 2024*, 21.

escalation of situations that might thereafter need a military response. The objectives of the NDS-2024 are<sup>4</sup>:

**Strengthening Military Capabilities:** To deter aggression, Australia plans to bolster its military capabilities. This includes enhancing its ability to project power and operate alongside allies like the US.

**Deepening Partnerships:** Australia recognises the importance of collaboration. Partnering with Pacific Island nations, India, and Japan, involves information sharing, joint training, and addressing shared threats like climate change.

**Optimising the Workforce:** NDS-2024 emphasises workforce optimisation. This involves strategically allocating resources and personnel for maximum efficiency and performance within the Australian Defence Force.

**Self-Reliance in Defence:** The strategy acknowledges the importance of self-reliance for national security. Investment in domestic shipbuilding allows Australia to maintain and repair military equipment, reducing dependence on foreign suppliers.

#### **Enhancement of ‘Maritime’- and ‘Naval’ Capacity and Capability.**

To deter adversaries in the Indo-Pacific, Australia is significantly expanding its naval muscle. This involves modernising existing warships with advanced missile-defence systems and integrating long-range strike capabilities. The *Hunter* Class frigates, for example, bring superior capabilities in anti-submarine warfare and air defence, while a new generation of frigates will be replacing ageing vessels. A particularly innovative addition is “Large Optionally-Crewed Surface Vessels”, offering long-range strikes and boosting overall fleet lethality. Helicopter support is crucial, too. The newly inducted MH-60R helicopters enhance anti-submarine capabilities and provide logistical support. Upgraded air-defence systems further strengthen Australia’s defences against advanced weaponry.<sup>5</sup> To maintain this expanded fleet, Australia is investing in infrastructure upgrades, a series of amphibious vessels, but, strangely enough, only two replenishment ships. A continuous shipbuilding programme is expected to create over 8,500 jobs by 2030 and Canberra hopes that its partnerships ensure a robust domestic shipbuilding industry.<sup>6</sup> This naval expansion signifies a strategic shift for Australia, prioritising control of Indo-Pacific maritime approaches through a modern and lethal fleet.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> National Defence Strategy 2024

<sup>5</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 40

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 59

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 37

## Indo-Pacific Region

Australia views the Indo-Pacific as its security lifeline. Rising US-China rivalry is Canberra's prime concern, with China's assertiveness seen as a threat to regional balance. Australia prioritises a rules-based order and stability, achieved through a strong US alliance, partnerships with India, Japan, and Southeast Asia, and a modernised military with nuclear-powered submarines (though the AUKUS construct). Transparency and regional cooperation are key for Australia, which seeks to deter aggression and maintain its role as the Pacific Island security partner of choice. While the Australian document emphasises collective security in the Indo-Pacific,<sup>8</sup> it does not explicitly mention the Indian and Japanese concept of a "*free, open, and inclusive*" Indo-Pacific. This notwithstanding, this regional vision aligns with India's own maritime objectives, which include: (1) Protection from sea-based threats to India's territorial integrity; (2) Stability (peace & prosperity) in India's maritime neighbourhood; (3) Creation, development, and sustenance of a 'Blue' Economy that is resilient against adverse maritime effects of Climate-Change; (4) The preservation, promotion, pursuit and protection of offshore infrastructure and maritime resources within and beyond the Maritime Zones of India (MZI); (5) The promotion, protection and safety of India's overseas and coastal seaborne trade and her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), as also the ports that constitute the nodes of this trade; (6) Support to marine scientific research, including that in Antarctica and the Arctic; (7) Provision of support, succour, and extrication-options to the Indian Diaspora; and (8) Obtaining and retaining a favourable geostrategic maritime-position.<sup>9</sup> By collaborating with Australia and other regional partners who share similar visions, India can advance its own objectives in the Indian Ocean, and acting together, Canberra and New Delhi can more synergistically contribute to a more secure and stable Indo-Pacific.

## Indian Ocean

The rising competition for influence in the Indian Ocean, with particular regard to control of sea lanes and strategic ports, has Australia on high alert. The NDS-2024 recognises the Indian Ocean's critical role in Australia's security and emphasises the need for regional stability. To achieve this, Australia prioritises cooperation. Australia seeks to significantly strengthen defence ties with India — such collaboration also extends to other Indian Ocean nations like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh through regular military deployments, training exercises, and information sharing. By prioritising regional cooperation and building strong partnerships based on transparency, Australia aims to safeguard the Indian Ocean's stability and secure her own strategic interests.<sup>10</sup> Notably, this pursuit of stability aligns perfectly with India's second objective of fostering stability (peace and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 5

<sup>9</sup> VAdm Pradeep Chauhan, "The Indian Navy in the Changing Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific", 31 August 31, 2023, [https://maritimeindia.org/the-indian-navy-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/#\\_ftn6](https://maritimeindia.org/the-indian-navy-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/#_ftn6).

<sup>10</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 49

prosperity) within its immediate maritime neighbourhood<sup>11</sup> and is identical to India's own principal maritime strategy in times of peace, namely. "Constructive Engagement".

## United States

Facing a rising and increasingly assertive China, Australia prioritises its military alliance with the US.<sup>12</sup> The two countries aim to deepen defence engagement through combined exercises, technology-sharing (AUKUS), and boosting interoperability for deterrence. While the US partnership remains central to Canberra, Australia also seeks robust partnerships with India, Japan, and the States of Southeast Asia to address shared security concerns. The NDS-2024 clearly brings out Australia's alliance-centric approach in respect of the US, its focus on collective deterrence through combined military strength, its emphasis on advanced technology and interoperability with allies, and the high value it places on regional cooperation. Where India's own approach is concerned, Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri has made it quite clear that *"India does not believe in partnering in military alliances. We are, however, a partner for many countries including in the military and defence field,"*<sup>13</sup> VAdm Chauhan is of the opinion that *"while conflict in the South China Sea has direct implications for Australia, Japan and the United States, it does not enjoy the same centrality for India."*

## China

The NDS-2024 states quite unequivocally that China has been employing *"coercive tactics"*<sup>14</sup> in the Indo-Pacific to pursue its strategic objectives. It emphasises the potential for regional destabilisation due to the *"lack of transparency surrounding some of China's Indo-Pacific initiatives."*<sup>15</sup> This blunt appraisal has created much discomfort for China and has led to China's foreign ministry spokesperson to state (while interacting with the media):

*"China is committed to peaceful development and a national defence policy that is defensive in nature. We stay committed to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region and the wider world and pose no threat to any country. The security risks in the region mainly come from some major countries outside the region. They have been forming exclusive groupings, stoking bloc confrontation, and in particular, muddying the waters in the South China Sea, as if the world needed any more instability. China firmly opposes it. We hope Australia will correctly view China's development and strategic intentions, abandon the Cold-War mentality, do more things to keep the region peaceful and stable, and stop buzzing about China."*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Chauhan, "The Indian Navy in the Changing Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific", [https://maritimeindia.org/the-indian-navy-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/#\\_ftn6](https://maritimeindia.org/the-indian-navy-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/#_ftn6)

<sup>12</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 8, 46

<sup>13</sup> "India Does Not Believe in Partnering in Military Alliances, Says Dy NSA Vikram Misri." *The Economic Times*, 03 June 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-does-not-believe-in-partnering-in-military-alliances-says-dy-nsa-vikram-misri/articleshow/100731547.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>14</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 12

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Sky News Australia, "China Responds to Australia's Increased Defence Spending", [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). 18 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JEoaLFAHQs>.

While Australia's stance on issues related to China may well challenge Beijing's regional ambitions and potentially damage the latter's international standing, it is nevertheless also true that China remains Australia's largest trading partner.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Chinese companies control a disconcertingly large amount of Australian port infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

This economic dependence of Australia upon China is an important factor for India to consider when evaluating its own strategic partnership with Australia in the Indo-Pacific. Offsetting such concerns that ought to be addressed by New Delhi is, of course, the fact that India, too, has a significant degree of dependence upon China for its own economic wellbeing.

## Japan

Recognising Japan's vital role in regional security, the NDS-2024 elevates Japan to an "*indispensable partner*"<sup>19</sup> for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This strong relationship is built on shared post-World War-II values and interests, allowing for close cooperation on multiple fronts. Australia prioritises trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US and holds that such cooperation fosters interoperability and coordinated action. The NDS-2024 emphasises the strengthening of strategic ties with Japan through consultations on potential conflicts while deepening collaboration on defence innovation and technology. In addition, Australia seeks "*high-end interoperability*"<sup>20</sup> with Japan's Self-Defence Forces across multiple domains and encourages greater Japanese participation in military initiatives within Australia. This focus upon a multifaceted partnership with Japan highlights Australia's desire to create a united regional front to address security challenges.

India, too, can and should leverage the existing Australia-India-Japan trilateral, with particular focus being placed upon cooperation in supply chain resilience.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, this trilateral framework presents an opportunity for New Delhi to further India's own objective of promoting, protecting, and ensuring the safety of her overseas and coastal seaborne trade, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and the crucial port infrastructure that serves these trade routes.

## AUKUS

AUKUS is a cornerstone of Australia's National Defence Strategy, fundamentally transforming the Australian approach to security and technology. The focus is on acquiring nuclear-powered

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2023, "Global Connections | Global Australia", <https://www.globalaustralia.gov.au/why-australia/global-connections#>

<sup>18</sup> Alex Blair, "Signal: Australia Second-Largest Recipient of Chinese Port Investment", *Ship Technology*, 14 November 2023, <https://www.ship-technology.com/news/signal-australia-second-largest-recipient-of-chinese-port-investment/#>

<sup>19</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 49

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Shino Watanabe, "Australia-India-Japan Trilateral Cooperation for Strengthening Supply Chain Resilience - Griffith Asia Insights." 23 May 2022, <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/australia-india-japan-trilateral-cooperation-for-strengthening-supply-chain-resilience/>.

submarines. It provides for a phased approach, with initial deployments of US SSNs to Australia, followed by the fielding of Australian-built SSNs. AUKUS also has a second line of thrust, which involves collaboration in eight areas of cutting-edge technology, wherein all three AUKUS partners have shown an interest in partnering with Japan.<sup>22</sup> This not only strengthens Australia's military capabilities but also aims to create a unified trilateral industrial base. By integrating with the US and UK defence sectors, Australia seeks to boost its own domestic industry and promote innovation. Overall, AUKUS is seen as critical for enhancing deterrence, achieving a technological leap, and fostering growth within the Australian defence industry.

Very substantial opportunities exist for India to collaborate within this second thrust line of the AUKUS programme, since India has independent and yet very significant technological prowess in all eight identified technologies, namely, (1) Undersea Capabilities; (2) Quantum Technologies; (3) Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy in contested environments; (4) Advanced Offensive and Defensive Cyber-Capabilities; (5) Hypersonic and Counter-hypersonic Capabilities; (6) Electronic Warfare; (7) Innovation (involving the integration of commercial technologies to solve warfighting needs); and (8) Information-sharing. If India can, indeed, partner AUKUS in these eight fields of defence high-technology, the combined effort would greatly contribute to a more secure Indo-Pacific, deterring potential Chinese coercion and intervention.

## Indonesia

The NDS-2024 identifies Indonesia as “*an essential and enduring partner*”.<sup>23</sup> This translates into a two-pronged approach. First, Australia is committed to fortifying its bilateral defence ties with Indonesia. This means increased investment in dyadic military cooperation, potentially involving combined exercises, training, and possibly technology sharing as well. Second, Australia recognises Indonesia's significance for regional security. The strategy stresses collaboration with Indonesia to address security challenges in Southeast Asia. By prioritising a deeper partnership with Indonesia, Australia aims to solidify both their bilateral relationship and contribute to a more stable Indo-Pacific region. India has an excellent opportunity to leverage the existing trilateral framework that includes Indonesia and Australia. Encouraging continued participation in trilateral security exercises would strengthen these partnerships and enhance their collective capability to maintain a stable, peaceful, and secure Indo-Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Tory Shepherd, “Australia Says Military Collaboration with Japan is not about Creating ‘Jaukus.’” *The Guardian*, 09 April, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/09/australia-says-military-collaboration-with-japan-is-not-about-creating-jaukus>.

<sup>23</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 48

<sup>24</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Defence, “Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri Participates in the Maiden India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise.” 22 September 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1959717>

## Oceania

Oceania retains high importance for Australia’s security as acknowledged in the NDS-2024, which emphasises “*Pacific family-first*”<sup>25</sup> solutions and prioritises supporting Pacific island-States as they wrestle with their security challenges. Australia’s aim is to be the preferred security partner through initiatives such as the “Pacific Maritime Security Programme”, which seeks to bolster maritime security capacities and capabilities.<sup>26</sup> Investing in combined exercises and training fosters interoperability between Pacific island maritime agencies and Australia, thereby strengthening regional capacity and enhancing regional capability. Australia emphasises respecting the sovereignty of Pacific island-States and collaborating on shared challenges such as climate change. Overall, the strategy prioritises a cooperative approach, building a secure Pacific alongside — rather than in lieu of — Pacific island leadership.

Given India’s own existing engagement with Pacific island-States through the “Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation” (FIPIC),<sup>27</sup> there is an excellent opportunity for further collaboration with Australia.

Independently, India should explore ways to contribute to the “Pacific Maritime Security Program”, thus complementing Australia’s capacity-building efforts and jointly enhancing the security capabilities of Pacific island-States. India’s experience in coastal surveillance and disaster management can also be shared with Pacific island-States, to substantial mutual advantage.

Additionally, both India and Australia are experienced practitioners in the provision of regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Collaboration on pre-positioning relief supplies and combined deployments can bolster regional response capabilities.

Climate change is another area that is ripe for India-Australia cooperation. India and Australia can co-develop infrastructure projects aligned with Pacific Island needs, ensuring regional stability and prosperity. Both nations need to collaborate on initiatives that address climate’s security risks in the Pacific, such as the provision of maritime infrastructure that is resilient against extreme weather events and rising sea levels. By working together, India, Australia, and the Pacific Island leadership, can become key trusted partners in maintaining a safe and secure Pacific.

## India

As already stated, the NDS-2024 positions India as an indispensable “*top-tier security partner*.”<sup>28</sup> This stems from shared concerns about regional stability. The Australian strategy prioritises

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<sup>25</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 13

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 47

<sup>27</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation.” <https://www.ficci-fipic.com>

<sup>28</sup> Australian National Defence Strategy 2024, 49

strengthening this bilateral relationship through practical manifestations of their “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.”<sup>29</sup> This translates to increased collaboration on practical matters such as combined exercises, information-sharing, and defence-industry cooperation. Australia sees India as a crucial player in countering regional challenges such as that involving Taiwan, as also confrontation in the Indian Ocean. Recognising the strategic significance of the northeastern Indian Ocean, Australia plans to work more closely with India through increased deployments and combined exercises in the region.<sup>30</sup> Overall, Australia’s strategy seeks to forge a deeper security partnership with India to ensure a stable Indo-Pacific.

## Conclusion

Within Australia itself, the NDS-2024 has received mixed reviews. While many consider it a positive step with clear direction and funding, some Australian experts feel that in focusing solely on military issues, the strategy neglects broader security ones and underplays the importance of utilising whole-of-Australia resources, including economic and diplomatic tools, all of which are crucial in today’s complex environment.<sup>31</sup> This may, however, be an unfair criticism since the title of the strategy document is quite unambiguously “defence” rather than “security” strategy. That having been stated, even within this limited “defence” ambit, a surprising feature is that while much has been made of Australia’s envisaged naval build-up, Australia plans to induct only two fleet replenishment ships. This seems rather inadequate for a navy that is expanding at such a rapid pace.<sup>32</sup> The NDS-2024 also glosses over the fact that the construction of a naval fleet of the size envisaged is a time-intensive process and Australia will have to live with significant capacity-gaps at least until the middle of the next decade. In the eyes of many scholars this gap-period is an extremely important one for Australia’s defence and security. Another critical consideration when analysing Australia’s National Defence Strategy is the tension between security concerns and economic realities. While the strategy acknowledges China’s coercive actions, as highlighted by the Defence Minister, China remains Australia’s largest trading partner. This underscores the interconnected nature of security (obviously incorporating “defence” as a subset) and economic interests. As in every nation, these are not independent but need to be made mutually reinforcing.

In essence, Australia’s 2024 National Defence Strategy prioritises deterrence through military modernisation and partnerships. While this approach seeks to strengthen Australia’s defence (and regional security) through collaboration with the US, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia, it glosses over the tension that is inherent between countering China’s influence on the one hand and Australia’s significant economic ties with Beijing on the other. Additionally, limitations in shipbuilding capacity present a potential gap in capabilities until the expanded fleet is fully operational. However, India’s

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 50

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Parker “Defence Strategy Fills Gaps but Misses Holes.” 19 April 2024, <https://www.jennifer-parker.com.au/post/defence-strategy-fills-gaps-but-misses-holes>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

alignment with Australia's vision for a stable Indo-Pacific opens doors for collaboration on maritime security, defence infrastructure, the derisking of existing supply chains, and the creation of new ones. By leveraging these opportunities and fostering a cooperative regional order based on comity, India and Australia can forge a powerful partnership that safeguards a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

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