



Assessing Australia's Strategic Personality

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 - Chapter 5: Australian Defence Force and Department of Defence personnel from Defence Space Command (DSpC) and Defence Science and Technology Group, work alongside an industry team led by SABER Astronautics in the Responsive Space Operations Centre Adelaide, as part of the Pacific Cell for the April 2022 Sprint Advanced Concept Training (SACT) event. (Australian Defence Force)
 - Chapter 6: Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong meets with Prime Minister of Tonga, Siaosi Sovaleni and presents him with a Wallabies Rugby jersey. (Wikimedia Commons)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like all states, Australia has a strategic personality—a set of recognisable traits that shape how policymakers manage security challenges. These traits are displayed in the ways that politicians, officials, and influential analysts process information about those challenges, craft responses, and implement policy. They tend to be consistent over time, but they are not unchangeable.

To assess Australia’s strategic personality and how it may be changing, as Australia’s security environment evolves, we developed a new approach and built a new dataset based on interviews with analysts and scholars from across the Indo-Pacific. This dataset allowed us to construct an account of how influential regional security experts perceive Australian policymaking and implementation. We analysed these findings with the advice of a group of Australian-based specialists on Australian foreign and security policy. For an additional check of robustness, we also conducted off-the-record interviews with regional diplomats based in Australia to ascertain their views of Australia’s strategic personality.

The project found that:

- Australia is mostly perceived as a state that is well-informed about the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, the drivers of change, and the capacities of regional actors to manage the security challenges they face, individually and collectively.
- Australia’s strategic personality is widely seen to have changed over the past decade, becoming more active, vocal, open to dialogue, and engaged.
- Australia is viewed as having an especially strong understanding of Southeast Asian states and regional security challenges and as playing an effective and positive role in that part of the Indo-Pacific.
- Australia is also perceived to have successfully modified its strategic personality and approaches to key partners like India and Japan, as well as South Korea and Taiwan.
- Australian diplomacy is perceived as active and capable by experts located in Quad partner countries.
- Australia is viewed by experts located in the Pacific and across the broader Indo-Pacific region as being less flexible and capable in managing relations with Pacific island states and societies.

The project was not designed to provide policy recommendations, but the findings do suggest some actions that might be taken to ensure that Australia has the strategic personality required to manage the challenges we face. These include:

- Clarifying Australia's second-order objectives in the Indo-Pacific, beyond upholding a rules-based order, stability, and prosperity.
- Taking stock of Australia's achievements in modifying its strategic personality and building stronger ties in Southeast Asia, in particular.
- Identifying the approaches that underpin success in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Indo-Pacific, with a view to translating them into parts of the region—notably the Pacific—where Australia has been less successful in recent years.



1 AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC PERSONALITY

1.1 Introduction

Australia now faces multiple overlapping challenges to its security and prosperity. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific is intensifying, as states modernise their militaries, acquire new capabilities in cyberspace and elsewhere, reshape economic linkages and supply chains, and attempt to exercise greater influence over regional states. The rules-based order on which Australia has long relied is coming under growing pressure, together with those states that have long sought to uphold it.

The 2016 Defence White Paper, 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, and 2020 Defence Strategic Update all identified the need for Australia to make substantial investments to safeguard Australian interests and defend the lives and livelihoods of Australian citizens. Together, they insist that Australia's success as a nation depends on robust democratic institutions, maintaining autonomy and flexibility, and resisting coercion by states that might wish to limit our choices. They focus the need to extend Australia's governmental and societal capacity to sustain and expand strategic partnerships with like-minded states across the Indo-Pacific, make substantive contributions to ensuring that international law is upheld, disputes are settled peacefully and equitably, and markets for goods, services, and capital remain open.

These policy statements all emphasise the need for Australia not merely to acquire new military technologies or pursue new agreements with regional partners, but to reorient the nation as a whole to allow it to better manage new threats and greater regional instability, as well as to take advantage of new opportunities. In effect, they call for Australia to take on a new 'strategic personality'—to develop a set of traits that will allow Australia successfully to navigate in a more challenging regional context.

1.2 A new Australian strategic personality?

Some discussion has already taken place about the kind of strategic personality Australia has and the kind of strategic personality it needs.

In a lecture delivered at the University of Melbourne, former ambassador John McCarthy (2019) agreed that Australia needs to develop new personality traits, given changing power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. McCarthy argued that Australians now need to think about external policy as an 'existential issue' in the way they have not had to do since the Second World War, thanks to the disruptive effects of Donald J. Trump's Presidency and China's 'pursuit of regional supremacy'. Today Australia faces, he went on, the prospect of having to 'take positions that will prompt pushback from others', including both China and the United States. It needs also to reduce the 'cultural divide' between Australia and especially Asian

states, boosting economic ties, but also linguistic competency. It needs to reinvest in diplomatic capacity. And it needs to attend to ‘national reputation’, because there are several ‘blots’ that complicate Australia’s relations with its neighbours:

We often are seen as putting domestic politics above serious international interests; as being unnecessarily hard charging and of blowing hot and cold; as changing prime ministers too often to maintain good governance; and as not independent from the USA on security issues. [...] Our policy on asylum seekers also has damaged us with other liberal democracies and our neighbours. We have diminished ourselves since, in addressing the Vietnam exodus, we were leaders in international refugee policy.

McCarthy concluded by calling for ‘foreign policy’ to be ‘seen as a core national interest’ and for it to be properly resourced as well as well directed. ‘A country will be more credible internationally if its own system works’, he observed: ‘if its policy statements are true, if it does things well, and if it does what it says it will do’.

In a response published a few days later, Rod Lyon (2019) from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute offered an alternative vision of Australia’s ‘strategic personality’. Using an approach derived from the Myers-Briggs Indicators, Lyon argued that Australia conformed to an ‘extroverted, sensing and thinking personality type’—looking outward, eschewing intuition in favour of empiricism, and making considered decisions instead of relying on feeling. He warned against changing this strategic personality, observing that if Australia became ‘more introverted, more intuitive or more feeling’, it ‘would make us look more like Iran, Russia and Serbia’.

Lyon acknowledged that being extroverted, sensing and thinking made Australia unusual in the region full of introverted states, including China, Japan, India, Indonesia, and South Korea. But he questioned whether attempting ‘an unlikely fundamental personality change’ was likely to work and whether it would work in Australia’s favour. It could even lead us into being seen as an inauthentic regional ‘poseur’. Instead, Lyon went on, Australia should focus on defining our ‘objectives and how best to pursue them’.

Lyon’s intervention did not, however, settle the debate. In a recent contribution, Bec Strating and Joanne Wallis (2022) argue that Australia’s strategic personality is more contested and malleable than some argue. They recall an event at which a presenter was asked about which person best represented Australia’s personality traits and replied: ‘Crocodile Dundee—confident and with a big knife’. This comment provoked a discussion among other participants, with some concluding that another individual, the Australian former tennis player, Ashleigh Barty, would be a better choice. Although they questioned the ‘value of anthropomorphising states in such a manner,’ they argued that Barty’s personality traits of humility, empathy, collective outlook, indigenous pride, perseverance, and versatility were preferable to the ‘unflattering stereotype’ evoked by a ‘hard drinking, boorish’ and culturally naïve fictional crocodile hunter (Strating and Wallis 2022).

These arguments from McCarthy, Lyon, and Strating and Wallis all suggest that the concept of 'strategic personality' might be a useful heuristic for understanding how the Australian government and Australian society more broadly thinks about, responds to, and acts in our region. But they also leave important questions unanswered:

- First, how should we frame the concept of strategic personality? To put it bluntly: we lack a functional theory of strategic personality that we can use to investigate the traits states display in their interactions with others. We need to know what it is, whether it changes, and what the sources of change are, if—contra Lyon—strategic personalities can be modified.
- Second, how best can we evaluate a state's strategic personality? What methods and approaches will produce robust data? The answer to this question is not clear, since we cannot ask states to complete a questionnaire or sit on a psychologist's couch.
- Third, what are the key traits of Australia's strategic personality? There is no consensus here. McCarthy (2019) suggests Australia can be selfish (focusing on domestic over international concerns), lacking in empathy (unnecessarily hard charging), emotionally inconsistent (blowing hot and cold), and lacking in confidence (failing to distinguish its views from those of the United States). Lyon (2019) sees Australia as extroverted (looking beyond its borders to have its ultimate concerns satisfied), sensing (being data or evidence driven in its decision making) and considered rather than emotional. Strating and Wallis (2022), for their parts, detect a strategic personality that might be 'boorish' but one that might be altered to display more positive traits.

1.3 Assessing Australia's strategic personality

This research aims to answer these questions, as well as report the results of our research into Australia's strategic personality. It begins with a discussion of the concept of strategic personality and its origins in debates about how strategic culture shapes decision-making and crisis behaviour. It identifies weaknesses in both the concept of strategic culture and in earlier understandings of strategic personality. It argues that we need a better concept to conduct meaningful research into Australia's strategic personality. It argues too that building a better concept demands we answer some more fundamental questions about what personalities are, whether corporate entities like states can be treated as having personalities, and whether personality traits associated with individuals can be used to assess the characteristics of states.

In section 3, we draw on theories of personality from psychology to provide a stronger account of personality and to introduce the idea of collective personality. Distinguishing between the underlying causes of personality traits and the traits themselves, we argue that states can be attributed personalities without running the risk of unwarranted anthropomorphising.

Section 4 develops our approach to assessing strategic personalities. Drawing on methods developed in personality psychology and foreign policy analysis, it focuses on trait analysis models, and makes the case for using informant reports to provide robust, evidence-based assessments. It also outlines the method and approach used in the empirical part of our research into Australia's strategic personality.

Section 5 reports and analyses the results of our research, concentrating on the data collected in a series of interviews with Indo-Pacific regional analysts conducted in late 2021 and early 2022 and informed by both confidential conversations with members of the Canberra diplomatic corps and Australian-based scholars and analysts.

We report that there is a widespread perception that Australia's strategic personality has changed over the past decade. We also report that this personality is generally well-regarded and seen as informed, considerate to regional concerns and interests, and active, and that Australia is seen to be making a positive contribution to regional security and prosperity. We note, however, that these perceptions are not even. Australia's behaviour in the Pacific, where it is seen to display some different personality traits than it does elsewhere in the broader Indo-Pacific, is viewed less positively. In that part of the region, Australia is seen as less sensitive to regional concerns, less creative, less willing to change and less capable of changing, as it is elsewhere.



2 STRATEGIC CULTURE AND STRATEGIC PERSONALITY

The concept of strategic personality emerged in the early 2000s out of dissatisfaction with the concept of strategic culture and other approaches that seek to explain the strategic decision-making and behaviour of states (see Ziemke 2000; Ziemke, Loustounau and Alrich 2000). In the first half of this section examines the evolution of both concepts in the scholarly literature. In the second half, we review how strategic culture and strategic personality have been applied to the Australian case.

2.1 Strategic culture

The concept of strategic culture emerged in the latter half of the Cold War as a means of explaining strategic behaviour that did not appear to be explicable in terms of instrumental rationality. Its proponents were especially concerned to shift the analysis of nuclear strategy away from abstruse rational choice and game theoretic models, arguing that they were unrealistic or unhelpful, both theoretically and practically. ‘Soviet man,’ as Jack Snyder famously put it, did not behave like ‘generic rational man’ (Snyder 1977). And nor, Colin Gray responded, did American ‘man’—including American policymakers who claimed to adhere to rational modes of decision-making (Gray 1981; cf. Gray 1986). The proponents of strategic culture argued instead that decision-making was shaped by beliefs and norms into which policymakers were socialised, that is, by the broader ‘culture’ in which they operated. These beliefs and norms were said to include both those that prevail in a society and those ‘strategic subcultures’ that prevail in specific communities—such as the government policymaking or, more narrowly, strategic defence communities—and which may or may not reflect the beliefs and norms of the society they serve.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the way this first generation of scholars framed ‘strategic culture’ has been challenged multiple times. One group of critics argued the first generation overplayed the stability and unchangeability of strategic culture and underplayed how far such cultures are deliberately constructed, reconstructed and manipulated by political elites (for example, see Klein 1994). Others argued that some strategic subcultures, such as armed forces or foreign ministries, are significantly different from those of society more broadly, possessing their own social constructed beliefs and norms that shaped their behaviour (for example, see Legro 1995). In making these cases, these studies drew heavily on work in organisational theory that tried to account for why bureaucracies operate as they do (Farrell 1996). Finally, one last group of scholars rejected what they characterised as unwarranted generalisations in the first generation of work, arguing that they produced overly deterministic accounts of behaviour and that they neglected the fact that strategic cultures can (and do) change over time. Like Klein, they criticised the idea that elites can manipulate and create strategic cultures, but they also charged that first-generation accounts failed to show which parts of a culture led to which decisions or behaviours. They argued that greater precision was needed in explaining both the relationship between culture and behaviour, as well as in explaining the supposed stability of strategic cultures.

None of these arguments are settled, but many scholars of security and strategy today acknowledge that cultural factors, derived from society and/or from a subgroup within that society, can shape strategic behaviour. There is also now general acceptance of the idea that strategic cultures change over time because they are socially constructed and modified, and the observation that subcultures that may deviate from the core beliefs and norms of the overarching strategic culture not only exist but may have greater influence over strategic policymaking and implementation than those wider sets of norms and values. Finally, there is broad recognition within the contemporary literature on strategic culture than although it is difficult to attribute decisions and behaviour to cultural variables, it may be possible to do so (Lock 2017).

2.2 Strategic personality

The concept of strategic personality was developed as a means of overcoming some of the problems with the idea of strategic culture. Caroline F. Ziemke (2001) played a key role in its development, aiming to supplant both rational actor models and strategic culture as means of explaining the strategic behaviour of states. Ziemke sought to explain state behaviour by focusing on how governments ‘identify threats or vulnerabilities’ and ‘decide on the best course of action to advance or defend’ what they see as their Ultimate Concerns. These are ‘the set of material, moral, or ideological factors that have emerged over the course of a state’s history as the keys to its long-term survival, cohesion, and sense of national well-being’. She argued that the ways in which states do this ‘is shaped by their ... Strategic Personalities’ (Ziemke 2001: 4).

These strategic personalities, Ziemke argued, comprised ‘habitual perceptive and decision-making styles’ (2001: 4). The concept referred to how states understand the world around them and determine the best course of action to respond to the challenges they face or pursue their objectives. Strategic personalities are products, Ziemke suggested, of the ‘historical plot’ of a state and the society it governs—by collective memories and myths. And these strategic personalities can be assessed in psychological terms, in a similar way to individuals can be assessed, using typologies to categorise different kinds of personalities and the different behaviour these personalities tend to generate.

The typology Ziemke used in these pioneering studies was an adaptation of the ubiquitous Myers-Briggs personality test used widely by psychologists. That schema divides personalities into various types according to four binaries: Extroversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving (Myers-Briggs Foundation 2020). For reasons not clearly explained, Ziemke used the first three of these binaries and omitted the last, categorising strategic personalities in terms of Extroversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, and Thinking/Feeling. She argued that extroverted states are more internationalist and

universalist in orientation, while introverted states are most concerned with preserving their autonomy and cohesion. Sensing states are essentially empiricist and focused on what is around them here and now; intuitive states are oriented more toward the future and realising visions. Thinking states are logical and ordered in the way they analyse events; feeling states will sacrifice logical analysis if their values and beliefs are challenged.

Together, these binaries generate eight different kinds of states (see Table 1 below), with different combinations of attributes: for example, China is cast as 'Introverted, Sensing and Thinking' while the United States is 'Extroverted, Intuitive and Feeling' (Ziemke 2001: A-11-A11).

Table 1. Possible strategic personality types, according to Ziemke (2001).

Extroverted	Sensing	Thinking
Extroverted	Sensing	Feeling
Extroverted	Intuitive	Thinking
Extroverted	Intuitive	Feeling
Introverted	Sensing	Thinking
Introverted	Sensing	Feeling
Introverted	Intuitive	Thinking
Introverted	Intuitive	Feeling

Ziemke argued that these different strategic personality types determine how states pursue their Ultimate Concerns. She suggested that the United States, for example, has two linked Ultimate Concerns: preserving and enhancing global freedom of action, which allows it to export its 'vision and values'. It has a strategic personality that is 'Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling'. For Ziemke, this combination of strategic goals and personality traits means that the US will be active and internationalist, future-oriented and progressivist, and emotional rather than coldly rational when faced with challenges (Ziemke 2001: ES-3).

By contrast, states like the Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which were Ziemke's primary interests in her research, share neither American Ultimate Concerns nor its strategic personality. Both are 'Introverted', Ziemke argued, but Iraq is a 'Sensing, Feeling' state and Iran is an 'Intuitive, Feeling' state (Ziemke 2001: ES-4). Because they do not share the Ultimate Concerns of the US, Iraq and Iran will tend to oppose Washington's efforts to secure them, but because they also have different strategic personalities, they will oppose those efforts in different ways. Iraq will concentrate on the 'here-and-now' and focus on 'measurable and observable threats to its territorial integrity, social and political cohesion, and economic and military capabilities' which are, along with status, its Ultimate Concerns (Ziemke 2001: 95). In a crisis, given this strategic personality, Iraq can therefore be deterred and

managed, provided it can be assured that its core interests—regime stability, internal stability, and territorial integrity—will be respected (Ziemke 2001: 45-48).

By contrast, Ziemke argues, Iran's strategic personality drives it to behave quite differently. It is shaped by tension between Persian nationalism and Shiite Islamism, by the belief that the Iranian nation is yet to realise its full glory, and by the conviction that although Iran is the 'Centre of the Universe' it is rarely recognised as such (Ziemke 2001: 62-3). Its Ultimate Concern is to protect and advance the 'visions' of Iran, both nationalist and Islamist (Ziemke 2001: 71-77). With this in mind, managing Iran depends on assuring it that the US (or anyone else) is not hostile to the vision and, at the same time, convincing Tehran that acquiring or using nuclear weapons will not help achieve it (Ziemke 2001: 83-4).

Ziemke's approach to strategic personalities has not been taken up by scholars to the same extent as the concept of strategic culture. But in the twenty years since her first article appeared, it has been adopted and adapted by several other researchers. Joanna Spear has applied it to the European Union (2003), while Wyn Rees and Richard Aldrich (2005) have used it to explore differing counterterrorism strategies. As we have seen, Rod Lyon (2015; 2019) has also applied Ziemke's schema to Australia. In the next part, we look at Lyon's work in more detail, along with assessments of Australia's strategic culture. We also return to Ziemke's approach in the conclusion to this section and outline its shortcomings.

2.3 Australia's strategic culture and strategic personality

Australia's strategic culture was not the subject of sustained analysis until the 2000s. Among the earliest scholars and analysts to engage with the topic was Hugh White, who argued that Australia had a 'powerful and idiosyncratic' culture characterised by:

... a strong predilection to alliances; an almost equally strong disposition towards self-reliance; a highly possessive approach to the islands in our immediate neighbourhood, often manifested as a kind of Monroe Doctrine; an acute sense of vulnerability in relation to our sparsely populated north and west, including a persistent anxiety about invasion; an endemic ambivalence towards Indonesia, and an instinct for what at one time was called forward defence (2002: 257).

These traits were, he argued, grounded in 'a deeply held sense of separateness from our regional environment, an undiminished adherence to the idea of the state as the key actor in the security arena, a belief in the enduring significance of armed force in the international system, and a strong apprehension of potential threats' (White 2002: 257). Moreover, they were distinctively Australian, as a 'quick comparison' with New Zealand's strategic culture demonstrated. White observed, however, that the elements of Australian strategic culture

were not fixed: from the 1970s to the early 2000s, there had been a shift in preference from forward defence to continental defence and back again (2002: 257–258).

White's article was followed by many others, including interventions from Coral Bell (2006), Nick Bisley (2016), Alan Bloomfield (2011), Alan Bloomfield and Kim Nossal (2007), Alex Burns and Ben Eltham (2014), Michael Evans (2002; 2005; 2006), Allan Gyngell (2017), David Kilcullen (2007), Jeffrey S. Lantis and Andrew A. Charlton (2011), and David McGraw (2011), among others.

Confusingly, however, these studies paint different pictures of Australian strategic culture. The majority argue that the dominant cultural trait is anxiety, which generates an acute sense of insecurity and which in turn leads to a strong drive to find a powerful protector, as well as an accompanying fear that the protector might abandon Australia (see Bell 2006; Bisley 2016; Gyngell 2017; McGraw 2001; cf. Burke 2001).

The others tell more complicated stories, suggesting that Australia's strategic culture has changed over time. For example, Evans (2002) argues that Australia's strategic culture is linked to its political culture and corresponding shifts in the beliefs and prejudices that characterise that set of beliefs, traditions, and practices. From Federation to the 1970s, he posits, Australia's political culture was marked by clear commitments to 'utilitarianism, egalitarianism, conformism, collectivism and materialism' (2002: 9). '[F]ive great interconnected pillars of public policy' were built on these foundations: 'state paternalism', 'industry protection', 'wage arbitration', 'the philosophy of White Australia' and 'the ideology of imperial benevolence' (2002: 11). Australia's strategic culture arose from those commitments and policies, reflecting a preoccupation with protecting the five 'domestic pillars', principally from political, economic, cultural, and security threats that might emerge from Asia. It led to a strategy that blended dependence on a great power ally with the use of expeditionary forces during regional crises.

However, Evans goes on, Australia's political culture has been transformed since the 1970s. And the five pillars of public policy have now gone, replaced by neo-liberal economic policies, multiculturalism, and greater intellectual openness to the wider region (Evans 2002: 13). At the same time, a tension between trade and defence policies has opened up, as the region linked to Australia's prosperity is also the region from which Canberra perceives that most of its most pressing potential security threats originate (Evans 2002: 14–15). And a new concern with maritime security has emerged, mostly clearly in the 'Defence of Australia' (DOA) concept in the 1987 Defence White Paper, with its focus on the 'air-sea gap' to the north of the continent (Evans 2002: 14).

Of course, Evans' argument is not universally accepted. McGraw argues, for example, that neither Australia's strategic culture nor its strategic policy has changed substantially since Federation, or even before that. Drawing a contrast with New Zealand, he contends that perceived vulnerability underpins a persistent strain of 'realism' in Australia. This strain

emphasises the need to possess and, if necessary, use military power to maintain security (McGraw 2011; cf. Wesley 2009).

Others agree with Evans that either or both Australia's strategic culture or security strategy have changed over time but disagree about exactly how and why. Kilcullen argues that Australia's strategic culture is given by its 'circumstances'—especially its geography—and is best understood as the culture of a 'trade-dependent maritime state' that cannot be assured of the security or stability of its region. Because Australia has to look far beyond its borders, its dominant strategic culture is thus one of 'forward engagement'. Alternative approaches have been tried, Kilcullen maintains—notably one that 'seeks to opt out of global engagement in favour of continental, or at most regional, exceptionalism' (2007: 37). But when governments try to do that, as they did between the mid-1970s and 9/11, the gravitational pull of Australia's strategic culture drags its diplomatic and military forces outward, to Bougainville, Cambodia, East Timor, Fiji, Kuwait, Rwanda, and the Solomon Islands, among other places (Kilcullen 2007: 56).

By contrast, Lantis and Charlton provide a much more dynamic account of Australian strategic culture, drawing on the literature on how elites filter and frame ideas to uphold or change security policy. For them, strategic culture is a variety of 'negotiated reality' (Lantis and Charlton 2011: 295). Like Kilcullen, they treat 'forward defence' as a strategic culture (rather than a policy that is a product of a strategic culture, as Evans does) and argue that it was dominant until the 1970s. But they also trace the impact of the strategic pressure and shocks on the ways in which Australian elites perceived and then framed its security needs, concentrating especially on the rise of China, the East Timor crisis, and 9/11. Contra Kilcullen, they argue that the shift to what they call 'regional defence plus' after 2000 was not given or determined, but a product of new elite interpretations and framing, drawing on familiar cultural themes to recast security policy (Lantis and Charlton 2011: 309). In broad terms, this analysis is reinforced by Burns and Eltham's research (2011) on the contestation between 'strategic subcultures', as well as work by Bisley (2016) and Bloomfield (2011).

Far less research has been done on Australia's strategic personality. Rod Lyon has been, however, a persistent advocate of the concept for almost a decade. In a paper published for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute prior to the 2016 Defence White Paper, he first argued that Australia was an Extroverted, Sensing and Thinking state, reasoning:

- We're extroverted because our "ultimate concerns" can't be satisfied at home.
- We "sense" the world and don't "intuit" it—we don't write proclamations about "self-evident truths".
- And we work by thought rather than emotion in international affairs—most classically when shifting our allegiance from Britain to the US during World War II (Lyon 2015, 5).

Lyon acknowledged that these were dominant, not entirely fixed traits: there are times, he noted, in which Australia can be insular or introverted. Moreover, Lyon observed that this

personality did not dictate a single model of strategic behaviour. Rather, he sketched out five different models: an Australia whose behaviour is determined by its British identity; an Australia than bandwagons with the 'dominant Western maritime power'; an Australia that 'wants to be both a middle power and a good international citizen'—a 'rule-designer and an institution-builder'; a more muscular Australia that wants to assert itself as a second-tier military power; and an Australia that jumbles all of the first four together, at the same time.

In Lyon's later article, he develops these ideas further, conceiving strategic personality as a product of history and culture manifested in 'the "ingrained habits"' of a state's 'long-term interactions with the world' (Lyon 2019). He again posits that Australia's strategic personality has long been Extroverted, Sensing, and Thinking—outwardly focused, empiricist, and logical in how it approaches problems of foreign and security policy. And he observes that these traits set Australia apart from most of its neighbours, especially in Asia, where states tend to be Introverted, Intuitive, and Feeling: inwardly focused and concerned for internal cohesion and stability, pursuing visions of the future, and filtering their responses to external challenges through frameworks of belief or ideology.

Aspects of Lyon's understanding of Australia's strategic personality intersect and contrast with dominant views in the scholarly literature of Australia's strategic culture. It agrees that Australia is extroverted, in the sense of being active beyond its shores and concerned about regional stability and security, without ascribing that extroversion to anxiety. Instead, it suggests that concern about its region is a function more of rational assessment of both Australia's strategic circumstances and the sources of stability and security.

2.4 Weaknesses and ways forward

As we have seen, existing approaches to assessing strategic culture and strategic personality have weaknesses and the concepts themselves may not be as useful as their proponents argue. There is strong evidence to suggest that cultural factors shape strategic behaviour, but cultures are complex and layered, and subcultures can and do exist within militaries and bureaucracies, so establishing exactly which part of a cultural inheritance shaped which action is difficult to achieve. Similarly, there is strong evidence to suggest that states might have personalities—in the sense of distinct observable traits that persist over time that relate to the ways in which information is processed and decisions are made.

Gathering evidence to demonstrate which states display which traits is however difficult. Ziemke's work, which sometimes lapses back into making claims about national histories, memories, and myths that are not unlike the claims made by scholars of strategic culture, demonstrates some of the pitfalls. And there are others. It is not possible to ask states to complete standard questionnaires similar to those used for Myers-Briggs tests for individuals.

Nor is it possible for a psychologist to assess a state's personality with a set of standardised queries.

To make matters worse, we argue, Ziemke relies on a problematic understanding of personality. We have already noted that her understanding of strategic personality is derived from the Myers-Briggs typology. The origins of that schema can be traced back to the work of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, famous for identifying introversion and extroversion as the two dominant personality orientations (1916a; 1916b). Jung (1921/1923) also identified what he understood as four personality functions—thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting—that have also proved influential. It was on this basis that Hans Eysenck (1952) developed a two- and later three-dimensional typology of personality and, later, Raymond Cattell (1965) developed a catalogue of 16 common personality traits. The most direct translation of Jung's analysis of personality types, however, was Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers' Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), developed in the 1940s. They translated Jung's four functions of thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting into four binaries: Extroversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving.

This typology is widely used, but also widely criticised (see Pittenger 1993; Gardner and Martinko 1996; Paul 2005: xiii; Krznaric 2013). One prominent criticism is that the binaries posed in the Myers-Briggs typology are false. Psychologists routinely observe that introversion and extroversion are not dichotomous, but exist on a spectrum with a bell-curve distribution, leaving most individuals categorised somewhere in the middle as 'ambiverts' (Grant 2013b).

Similarly, the sensing and intuition categories, which attempt to capture how individuals perceive reality—in terms of 'facts' consciously gathered by the senses, or as the result of impressions and abstract ideas—are not black and white alternatives. Instead, they refer to the different ways in which knowledge is processed and used in the brain in different circumstances. Intuition is not anti-empiricist or devoid of data but is an automatic and unconscious cognitive process of pattern matching that draws on long-term memories to make fast assessments in the present (Glöckner and Witteman, 2010). Recent research in the neurosciences has also done away with the idea that reason and emotion exist in a dichotomous relationship and demonstrated, instead, that emotion is an essential component of reasoning, present in even our most self-consciously rational thought processes (Damasio 2005; Haidt 2001; Greene 2008; Jeffery 2014).

Recognising these weaknesses but recognising too that strategic personality is an idea that still has potential for the analysis of strategic decision-making and behaviour, the next section develops both a more robust understanding of the concept and an approach to gathering and analysing evidence.



3 RECONCEPTUALISING STRATEGIC PERSONALITY

The first part of this section provides what we argue is a stronger concept of strategic personality, grounded in recent research in psychology. The second develops the approach we used to assess Australia's strategic personality, which we derived from leadership trait analysis, and which involves obtaining 'informant reports' through confidential interviews with experts located across the Indo-Pacific. We argue that this approach provides us with a robust way to gather the data required to build up an accurate picture of how Australia's strategic personality is perceived in Australia's region.

3.1 What is personality?

'Personality' conventionally refers to 'an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns' (Funder 2019: 4). In the contemporary scholarly literature, however, personality refers to two things. The first is the set of an individual's observed behaviours, described by way of personality indicators, typologies, and lists of traits. The second concerns the 'underlying structures, dynamics, processes and propensities that bring about certain behavioural regularities' (Hofmann and Jones 2005: 509; Hogan 1991). This latter understanding of personality has inspired the creation of five main clusters of theories of personality—biological, behavioural, psychoanalytical, humanist, and social cognitive theories—that aim not to map behaviours, but to explain them.

In their own ways, each of these theories of personality relate personality to a human body, brain, and/or mind, posing a challenge to the idea that collective entities, like states, might have personalities. Biological theories attribute personality development to factors like genetics and hormone levels. Behavioural theories view personality as a function of the interaction between individual bodies and brains, their environments. Psychoanalytical theories focus on the unconscious mind and childhood experiences as the key determinants of personality. And social cognitive theories conceive personality as the result of interactions between social observations, influences, and cognitive processes. All of them pose the question: in the absence of a body, brain, or mind, does it make sense to attribute personalities to other things?

3.2 Can states have personalities?

For some, the answer to this question is simply no. Others worry about the dangers that might lie in anthropomorphising states. Some of these dangers have highlighted elsewhere in strategic studies, for example, in the use of rational actor models to explain nuclear deterrence, (see Lebow and Stein 1989). These concerns may underlie Strating and Wallis' 2022 uneasiness about using the concept of strategic personality. We argue, however, that it

is possible and potentially helpful to think about collective entities like states as having personalities.

If we return to the basic definition of personality, we find that two of the three components can be readily applied to states. The suggestion that states *think* is relatively uncontroversial: reams of scholarship on what they think and how they think – how they process information, deliberate, and make decisions—attests to this (see, for example, Allison 1971 or Jervis 1976). Conventionally too, states are viewed as actors – that is, as being capable of acting—and as exhibiting *patterns of behaviour* (see, for example, Waltz 1979). Perhaps more controversial, though becoming increasingly less so, is the idea that the third component—*emotions*—are also present in personalities of collectives, like states.

Emotions are hybrid phenomena that combine cognitive appraisals with bodily experiences, and are shaped by social norms, expectations, and contexts. For much of the last century, scholars drew a firm distinction between ‘feeling’ (James, 1884; 1950) and ‘cognitive’ (Bedford, 1956–1957; Pitcher, 1965; Arnold, 1960) theories of the emotions. The first conceived emotions as felt and bodily responses to a stimulus; the second conceived them as cognitive, involving thought. Today, it is well-accepted that emotions are both felt and cognitive, and that our emotional responses are also conditioned by our social development—by socially constructed understandings of how we ought to respond that we pick up from others. Emotions are conceived as evaluations, appraisals, judgments, and beliefs (Nussbaum, 2004; Solomon, 1995). They can entail non-moral judgments about likes (happiness or joy) and dislikes (sadness or despair), comforts (contentment) and discomforts (anxiety). They can also entail moral judgments about right and wrong. Moral judgments of disapprobation may entail the condemnation of the behaviour of others (anger, resentment, indignation, contempt, or disgust), or self-condemnation in the forms of shame, remorse, embarrassment, or guilt, while positive moral emotions may include self- and other-directed judgments of gratitude, admiration, pride, and possibly love (Haidt, 2001).

In theory, then, states could experience the cognitive component of emotion, since they are widely accepted to be entities that think. But might they also ‘feel’ emotion in a similar way to the ways in which individuals experience bodily responses (Prinz, 2004: 10)? Conventionally, we often attribute feelings to states, explaining the causes of wars, for instance, to fear or hatred (see for example, Halperin, Canetti-Nisim and Hirsch-Hoefler 2009). Whether this is a reasonable move to make is now a matter of considerable debate (Mercer 2014; Hutchison 2016).

Drawing on recent research in psychology and neuroscience, Jonathan Mercer argues that ‘group-level emotions’ not only exist but ‘can be stronger than, and different from, emotion experienced as an individual’ (2014: 515). Group emotion, he explains, ‘does not require that individuals within that group exhibit uniformity of thought, behaviour, or expression’ but does suggest that most members of a group share ‘broadly similar emotions’ (Mercer 2014: 518 & 527). Those emotions are generated and regulated by culture, the influence of group

members on one another, emotional contagion, and the fact that ‘events that have group-level implications elicit common group-level reactions’ (Mercer 2014: 523-524). Extending his understanding of group emotion to the level of the state, Mercer suggests that despite the absence of biological bodies, collective entities like states can be said to experience emotions.

In short, theorists of collective personality argue that collectives can be said to have personalities, that those personalities have different foundations to individual personalities but manifest in similar ways and, as such, the methods used to observe and assess individual personalities are also applicable to collectives.

Strategic personality can thus be conceived as the thought, emotion, and behaviour of states in pursuing their strategic goals. Like all forms of personality, it has two dimensions: observable traits, including patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour; and underlying drivers, including political, cultural, economic and other factors that might explain how and why the state’s personality traits have developed over time.

3.3 Approach: Leadership trait analysis and the Big Five

The concern of this project is mapping the first dimension of Australia’s strategic personality: the observable traits evident in regular patterns of thought, emotional responses, and behaviour. As we noted in the previous section, much work has already been done, in the strategic culture literature and in the wider literature on the evolution of Australia’s foreign and security policies, on the second dimension: the underlying drivers. In this part, we outline the approach that we used in the project to gather and analyse the data we used to assess Australia’s strategic personality.

Extensive work has already been done in political science and international relations to assess personalities and how they might shape the foreign and security policies of states, especially in the subfield of political psychology. The bulk of this work focuses, however, on assessing the personalities of individuals. This is normally done in one of two ways: Operational Code Analysis (OCA) and Leadership Trait Analysis (LCA).

Introduced in Nathan Leites’ (1951) work on the Soviet Politburo and developed by Alexander George (1969), OCA examines how a leader’s beliefs about themselves (instrumental beliefs) and about the universe (philosophical beliefs) shape the ways in which they make decisions. Originally focused just on individual leaders, some proponents have recently extended OCA ‘from the study of belief systems of leaders as decision units to include states and other agents’ (Walker and Shafer 2021).

The principal alternative to OCA was developed by Margaret G. Hermann (1980; 2005). Widely used in political psychology and foreign policy analysis, LTA focuses not on evaluating leader beliefs, but identifying leadership styles. It examines how leaders respond to constraints; how open they are to incoming information; and what motivates them. It holds that along a spectrum of styles leaders can be divided into:

1. those who respect or those who challenge the constraints they face;
2. those whose decisions tend to be shaped by prior assumptions or those who tend to be open to new information; and,
3. those who are motivated by an inner concern for a cause or those who are motivated by a desire for external validation.

It identifies seven traits that allow us to establish the style of individual leaders:

- a. belief in their ability to control or influence a situation;
- b. need for power and influence;
- c. ability to manage complexity in the information they receive;
- d. self-confidence;
- e. relative preference for problem-solving versus maintaining relationships;
- f. relative distrust and suspicion of others; and
- g. the intensity of their in-group bias.

LTA assesses these styles and traits by analysing what is conventionally termed 'spontaneous material'. This includes speeches and interviews by leaders, with a bias toward the latter, as they are generally less scripted and less likely be the product of a collective effort by officials, and thus give better insights into a leader's 'true' nature (Kille and Scully 2003: 184). After gathering this material, the LTA researcher then uses content analysis to look for keywords or phrases that may suggest certain traits. Supporters of this approach defend its methods as being a robust and reliable means of undertaking at-a-distance personality measurement (Kille and Scully 2003: 184) and note that it has served to demonstrate 'the importance of personality in international relations' (Kaarbo 2017: 25).

LTA is a respected approach but has several limitations. First, critics argue that its content analysis methods, which rely on dictionary definitions of key words may generate inaccuracies, especially in cases where local nuances, colloquialisms, and indirect forms of language are used by a leader. Second, critics observe that the methods used mean that LTA is limited to assessing individuals, 'precluding comparisons to mass personality or to leaders in other decision-making domains'. Finally, these critics also note that LTA is 'largely cognitive in focus, ignoring more affective dimensions of personality' (Brown, Howath and Stevens 2021: 337).

Despite its limitations, however, LTA has one significant benefit: it was developed to assess personality in the specific contexts of international politics and foreign policy, to understand

how personality affects the particular types of decisions and interactions that mark international relations (Hermann 1980). To this end, we suggest that a modified version of LTA, adapted to apply to states and to overcome the limitations identified above, provides a robust framework for evaluating states' strategic personalities. These modifications entail using conceptual and methodological elements of the Big Five model.

Developed by Robert McCrae and Paul Costa in the 1980s, the Big Five model identifies five major personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (sometimes shortened to OCEAN). Each trait is understood to have several facets:

- *Openness to experience*: Openness to fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values
- *Conscientiousness*: Competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-disciplines, deliberation
- *Extroversion*: Warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, positive emotions
- *Agreeableness*: Trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, tender-mindedness
- *Neuroticism*: Anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness (Gallagher and Allen 2014: 4)

Today, the Big Five model is 'the dominant paradigm of personality psychology', underpinned by an expanding body of empirical evidence which has 'provided outstanding support and consensus for a model of personality traits clustered around five broad factors' (Gallagher and Allen 2014: 3). Among its core strengths are its 'consistency and reliability' and, as a range of studies have demonstrated, its universal applicability across 'gender, ethnicity, culture, and time' (Gallagher and Allen 2013: 3; McCrae and Costa 1987).

Among the Big Five model's benefits is the fact that it can be reliably applied to collective personalities. Drawing on existing accounts (Hofmann and Jones 2005; Roberge, Xu, and Rousseau 2012; Funder 2019), the five personality traits may be translated to collective entities, including the state, as follows:

Openness to experience is defined as the 'willingness to explore, tolerate, and consider new and unfamiliar ideas and experiences.' Collectives that are open to experience are 'less likely to be dogmatic,' 'more willing to consider different opinions' and 'less likely to downplay conflicts' (Roberge, Xu and Rousseau 2012: 416). States that are open are willing to adopt norms that challenge the status quo, demonstrate 'innovation and creativity' and are committed to 'learning and improvement' (Hofmann and Jones 2005: 512).

Conscientiousness is marked by 'the tendency to be organised, purposeful and responsible' (Roberge, Xu and Rousseau 2012: 418). It is associated with 'expectations and norms supporting and reinforcing efficient and systematic performance' (Hofmann and Jones 2005: 511). A conscientious state is well-prepared for its interactions with others and is attentive to 'accuracy, timing and follow-through' (Halfhill, Nielsen, Sundstrom and Weilbaecher, 2005: 43).

Extroversion at the collective level is 'the tendency to be assertive, active, and sociable' (Roberge, Xu and Rousseau 2012: 419). Extroverted states tend to take on leadership roles, engage in collective action, and are satisfied with their role in the international system (Funder 2019: 135). They seek and enjoy the achievement of status in international relations.

Agreeableness is defined as the 'desire to get along with other and have sympathy for their problems.' Agreeable collectives tend to display altruism, trust, and helpfulness, the desire to 'restore social harmony' in the face of conflict, and a commitment to building and maintaining positive social interactions (Roberge, Xu and Rousseau 2012: 417-418). Agreeable states are guided by norms of 'helpfulness, consideration, and cooperation' (Hofmann and Jones 2005: 511).

Neuroticism is 'the tendency to experience negative emotions including fear, embarrassment and guilt.' Collectives that are highly neurotic 'tend to display less prosocial behaviour than those with low negative affect', exhibit hostile reactions, avoidance and withdrawal from interactions with others, and find it difficult to result conflicts (Roberge, Xu and Rousseau 2012: 421). Neurotic states are sensitive to perceived threats, are anxious about their security, and tend to lack confidence in their ability to successfully engage with others, effectively address security threats, and protect their interests.

Alongside demonstrating the applicability of the Big Five to collectives and even states, recent research has also identified significant overlaps between the personality and leadership traits that LTA and the Big Five Model seek to evaluate. They have found that:

- a. belief in the ability to control a situation is associated with key facets of *extroversion* including confidence and optimism (Keller and Foster 2012: 587-588) and is a contra-indication of *neuroticism*;
- b. the need for power and influence is indicative of assertiveness, as well as concern for status and reputation, facets of *extroversion* (Hermann and Page 2016: 130);
- c. the ability to manage complex information is closely related to *openness to new information* (Cuhadar et al., 2017: 44), willingness to consider alternative information and views (Keller and Foster 2012: 595), and *conscientiousness* in obtaining information before making decisions, developing 'complex images of others' and operating with 'a more nuanced view of the political world' (Dyson 2006: 295);

- d. high levels of self-confidence, particularly when combined with an ability to manage complex information, are also directly related to *openness to information* (Cuhadar et al., 2017: 44) and *extroversion*,
- e. a preference for problem-solving over maintaining relationships may indicate a lack of *agreeableness*,
- f. distrust and suspicion of others is a determinant of aggressive and hostile reactions also associated with *neuroticism* (Keller and Foster 2012: 595); and,
- g. in-group bias is a reasonably good approximation of *agreeableness*: the extent to which a state demonstrates empathy, helpfulness and concern in its dealings with others.

By understanding the LTA traits in terms of their relationship to the Big Five traits, we are thus able to identify affective elements in ways that are applicable to states.

3.4 Methods: Informant reports via expert interviews

We noted above that LTA focuses on the spontaneous material produced by individual leaders, conducting content analysis, using key words, on speeches and interview transcripts. This method is patently not appropriate for assessing strategic personalities. States do not make spontaneous statements that can be analysed. Research using the Big Five, however, provides some pointers for data collection.

Work in that area focuses on four types of data to assess personality traits, each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages (Funder 2019: 24):

1. *Self-reports* that allow researchers to glean large amounts of information, provide access to the subject's thoughts, feelings and intentions, provide indications of causal relationships, and are relatively simple and easy to conduct. Where the assessment of collectives or states is concerned, they require careful sampling of representative subjects to eliminate potential bias. At both the individual and collective level, self-reports also run the risk of distortion: that is, subjects are not always the best judges of themselves.
2. *Informant reports* that also allow researchers to gather large amounts of information, provide access to real-world and common-sense impressions of subjects, and provide evidence of causal relationships. As with self-reports, informant reports of both individuals and collectives require careful sampling of informants to eliminate potential bias. Unlike self-reports, informant reports are limited by a lack of access to private information.

3. *Life outcomes* assessments that focus on the measurement of objective and verifiable outcomes associated with the expression of particular personality traits and combinations of traits. While it has the benefit of being able to focus on those psychological traits that are of most relevance to a particular subject or in a particular context, it also struggles to identify which, among many factors are causally related to personality.
4. *Behavioural observation* that relies on the external observation of a subject's behaviour in order to assess their personality. For both individuals and collectives, it has the advantage of incorporating observations across a range of different 'real world' contexts and being relatively objective. This approach is, however, difficult to undertake, expensive, and time-consuming.

For this project, we argue that the most useful of these approaches is clearly the second: using informant reports to gather data on Australia's strategic personality. This approach allows researchers to assemble multiple pictures of aspects of a personality and then to use these to assess common and diverging views of that personality among the interview subjects. They also researchers to overcome some of the problems inherent in self-reporting highlighted above and to gather data relatively economically.

In this specific case, we also opted for informant reports for some additional reasons. Above all, we were concerned that the overwhelming bulk of research done on Australian foreign and security policy is produced by Australian-based scholars, commonly with degrees from Australian universities, with strong networks with other Australian-based scholars (see Taylor 2021). While acknowledging that much of this work is insightful and robust, there is a risk that some research is affected by the kinds of in-group bias or 'groupthink' that can arise in relatively small scholarly communities (Hart, Stern and Sundelius 1997).

More importantly, the success of Australian strategic policy depends far less on influencing and persuading Australian-based observers, and far more on influencing and persuading elites and publics across the Indo-Pacific. Understanding the perceptions of prominent regional experts is critical to this exercise, as they play crucial roles in shaping opinion and informing policymakers. Put bluntly: how they understand Australia's strategic personality is more important than how Australians understand it. If it is perceived as flexible, open to new information, confident, informed, and empathetic, for example, current or potential partners will likely see Australia as a reliable collaborator. Similarly, if Australia's strategic personality is perceived as inflexible, closed to new information, anxious, wedded to outdated assumptions, and insensitive, partners may see Australia as less reliable and—just as importantly—competitors could act to exploit those weaknesses.

For these reasons, this project relied predominantly on informant reports. In the main part of the project, we invited recognised experts in Indo-Pacific security from across the region to participate in a structured interview with one of the investigators, using a fixed set of

questions, outlined below. Potential participants were identified by the four investigators, with a view to ensuring a reasonable geographical spread, a reasonable gender balance, and a reasonable spread in relative seniority. The interviews were originally intended to be in-person, but because of Covid-19 related travel restrictions, they were conducted online.

In total, twenty-five interview requests were issued and eighteen accepted for recorded interviews. The interviews took place online between August 2021 and March 2022. They were recorded using video conferencing software and transcribed, and the recordings stored on a secure server.

In parallel, additional off-the-record interviews were conducted with foreign diplomats in Canberra. These interviews were informed by the approach taken here but were not structured. To ensure that the diplomats were able to speak as freely as possible, the interviews were not recorded. The data gathered was used as background in the analysis of the informant reports in the formal expert interviews and as a means of triangulation—as a way to measure of how far our anonymous expert informant reports aligned with diplomatic perceptions of Australia’s strategic personality.

As a further check on the robustness of the data gathered from the informant reports, the investigators held a two-hour online workshop with a group of Australian experts on foreign and security policy, held on 28 October 2021. The investigators endeavoured to ensure this group was also balanced in terms of geographical and institutional location, gender, and seniority. Twenty-one invitations were issued to experts in universities and think tanks and fifteen were able to take part in the discussion.

The Australian expert group was asked to respond to a paper that outlined the approach to assessing strategic personality used in the project and some of the data gathered during the first round of interviews. In order to ensure that the participants in the workshop could speak as freely as possible, the responses were anonymised after being recorded.

3.5 Expert interview questions

The questions used in the expert interviews were derived from the approach outlined above, which combines Leadership Trait Analysis with the Big Five model. They focused on four areas of Australia’s strategic personality—its capacity to manage the constraints on Australia as a regional actor; how Australia processes the information it receives from its region and uses that information to shape policy and implementation; the motivations of Australian strategy; and assessments of change over time.

A. Managing constraints

Q1. In terms of regional diplomacy, would you characterise Australia as a proactive player, trying to build and shape regional order, or a reactive one, trying to cope with challenges and crises as they arise? (Extroversion)

Q2. Again, in terms of regional diplomacy, would you characterise Australia as an actor that wants to be seen and recognised as a regional leader or as an actor more focused on successful collective action? (Extroversion/Agreeableness)

B. Processing information

Q3. In your view, does Australia approach the region with a strong set of prior assumptions or does it assess challenges as they arise, on their merits? (Openness)

- How open is Australia to new information that might challenge longstanding views of the region and its challenges? (Openness)
- How well does the Australian government adapt when presented with new information? (Openness)

Q4. Does Australia approach the region with confidence? (Conscientiousness/Neuroticism)

- Is that confidence well grounded? (Conscientiousness)
- Is the source of Australian confidence a set of strongly held assumptions or a set of proven skills for understanding the region and its challenges? (Conscientiousness)

C. Motivations

Q5. What do you think are Australia's main aims, in terms of its regional diplomacy and strategy?

Q6. In your view, does Australia understand its role in the region to be solving problems or maintaining frameworks or rules that allow problems to be resolved collectively? (Extroversion/Agreeableness)

Q7. When Australia looks beyond its borders, do you think it sees a region characterised more by risks or threats or problematic states than one characterised by opportunities or partners? (Neuroticism)

- Do you think Australia conceives international relations more of a zero-sum game or more of a field in which it is possible to cooperate on shared challenges? (Agreeableness)

Q8. Do you see Australia as being predominately self-interested in terms of its diplomacy, focused narrowly on protecting Australian interests and/or values, or more concerned with upholding regional interests and values? (Agreeableness)

D. Change over time?

Q9. Has Australia's approach to the region changed over time, in your assessment? If so, why? If not, why not?

3.6 Conclusion

This section has mapped out the approach and methods used in the project. The next sections report our results, focusing in turn on the data gathered from the informant reports concerning Australia's approaches to managing constraints and processing information, Australia's motivations, and whether these elements have changed in recent years.



4 RESULTS: MANAGING CONSTRAINTS

4.1 Introduction

This section reports and analyses the data from the informant reports concerning the first aspect of Australia's strategic personality: how Australia manages the constraints that it perceives in the region. The responses to Q1 and Q2, which were designed to provide insight into this aspect, show some variation. The majority of interviewees thought that Australia is a proactive player in the Indo-Pacific, but many also argued that Australia was proactive in reaction to the actions of others. They also observed changes in the nature of Australia's proactivity—particularly a shift away from a broader approach concerned with advancing certain agendas concerning issues like non-proliferation and toward a narrower, harder-edged, approach that focuses more on military issues that involves working in partnership with others in the region. These views were also expressed by the majority of foreign diplomats with whom the investigators spoke and indeed by the majority of the Australian experts with whom they consulted.

The majority of the interviewees also argued that Australia is now moved to act less by status concerns or a desire to be perceived as a regional leader, and more by the desire to see practical cooperation on issues that Canberra deems core to the maintenance of regional stability and security. Some interviewees observed a significant shift in aims—a move away from championing big regional schemes like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the idea of an Asia Pacific Community (APC) and towards more limited goals.

Many interviewees also observed different behaviour and different objectives in different parts of the Indo-Pacific, especially the distinction between self-consciously working in 'partnership' with Southeast Asia states and Quad members and assuming a leadership role in the Pacific that implies less quality in relationships.

4.2 Proactive or reactive?

Q1. In terms of regional diplomacy, would you characterise Australia as a proactive player, trying to build and shape regional order, or a reactive one, trying to cope with challenges and crises as they arise?

This question was intended to test whether Australia has a strategic personality that challenges constraints and aims to shape and change the situation in which it might find itself, or whether it remains within those constraints and confines itself to trying to manage the situation in which it finds itself.

The majority of interviewees expressed the view that Australia is today a proactive player in the Indo-Pacific, seeking to shape and change regional order. Only three interviewees argued

that Australia is reactive. Interestingly, two of those respondents were located in the Pacific, and their other comments reflected a broader view expressed by all Pacific-based interviewees that Australia does not have the initiative in that region and is reacting rather than shaping changing strategic dynamics.

The interviewees from Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia generally viewed Australia as proactive. They also noted two shifts over time: first, from being reactive or allowing others, notably the US, to take the lead to being more active; and second, from being proactive about grand initiatives, like Kevin Rudd's Asia Pacific Community concept, to being proactive about less grand, but arguably more consequential, projects.

For example, Interviewee 7 observed that Australia is increasingly proactive but within the confines of 'existing mechanisms' like ASEAN and is now perceived as 'up there', in terms of diplomatic activism, with Japan. Interviewee 11 agreed, noting that Australia is 'evolving towards [being] more proactive' but arguing too that it has become 'more and more results oriented'. Interviewee 16 said similar things: Australia has become more active under the present government and was leveraging relationships with other US allies and partners well, to try to maintain security and stability.

In this context, several interviewees did however question how far Australia's new proactivity was Australia's own initiative. Two Southeast Asian respondents referred back to Australia's role in the War on Terror and to its work on regional counterterrorism initiatives, which they suggested arose from Canberra's willingness to act as a 'deputy sheriff' for the US. They were not wholly comfortable with that role or agenda. Interviewee 12 reported that Australia was 'still seen' in some parts of Southeast Asia as a 'not wholly autonomous actor' and that this sometimes led to 'ambivalent' responses in the region. Interviewee 17 concurred but suggested that Australia's new proactivity is perceived as less tethered to American agendas than were the counterterrorism efforts it made in the region after 9/11.

Australia's new agenda was described in consistent terms. Interviewee 2 stated: 'Australia now sees itself as an author of a series of smaller groupings with a harder edge', as opposed to being a catalyst for larger multilateral groupings like APEC. And despite seeing the region 'less optimistically' and 'more pessimistically', added interviewee 2, Australia was still seen to be 'trying to create new bits of the [regional security] architecture'. In parallel, Australia was also perceived to be active in Southeast Asia in 'shaping the [security] environment through engagement', according to interviewee 8, whether bilateral or multilateral, in forums like the East Asia Summit. Interviewee 18 concurred with that assessment, referring to how Australia was 'constantly trying to shape the region'. Capacity building activities were singled out by interviewee 17 for special praise, as well as Australia's knowledge of Southeast Asia and its needs. All this work, observed interviewee 5, involved Australia 'punching beyond its weight' especially in Southeast Asia.

There were also some veiled and some more direct criticisms. Interviewee 13 characterised Australia's new activism as being 'proactive for reactionary ends' or 'conservative goals'—those ends being the preservation of a US-led regional order. Another respondent (7) argued that it was sometimes hard to decipher what Australia was trying to achieve in Southeast Asia, partly because different parts of government were conveying different messages. The narratives from Foreign Affairs and Trade, on the one hand, and Defence, on the other, were not always aligned. Interviewee 7 also observed that it was difficult to distinguish Australian agendas from American ones—that it was 'really hard' to know where Canberra was 'carrying the water' for Washington, rather than doing something Australia had devised. Interviewee 5 was generally positive, but noted that Australia could be 'unpredictable', as it was in calling for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in 2020, for example.

Views of Australia's activism in the Pacific were also mixed. Interviewee 3 characterised the Pacific Step-up as a proactive reaction to Chinese actions but pointed to constructive work done by Australia in reinforcing regional security architecture and capacity. Interviewee 14 was more negative. Australia's shift from predominantly supporting governance initiatives to backing infrastructure projects in places like Papua New Guinea was clearly a reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative, they argued, and left some people wondering why infrastructure had not been an Australian priority before.

Finally, several interviewees argued that Australia's activism was, as interviewee 12 put it, 'unbalanced'—relying on defence and security engagement but neglecting economic and other ties. This generated an 'ambivalent perception' in Southeast Asia, in particular.

4.3 Status or outcomes?

Q2. ... in terms of regional diplomacy, would you characterise Australia as an actor that wants to be seen and recognised as a regional leader or as an actor more focused on successful collective action?

This question speaks to motivation, but also to leadership styles—to whether Australia wants to be seen and recognised as a leader or whether it is more results-focused.

Some interviewees dismissed the idea that Australia was motivated by status or recognition-seeking: interviewee 13 said Australia is 'not interested in status'. But some did think that a search for status or recognition was part of its new activism. Interviewee 10 observed that Australia was keen to be seen as 'out in front' and interviewee 14 agreed. Interviewee 8 put what they called the 'status thing' in these terms: that Australia was still 'uncomfortable' with its location and its neighbours—that it was 'a part of the region, but apart'. At least some of its activism is motivated by an ongoing desire to find the right regional niche for Australia.

Interviewee 4 said something similar, arguing that Australia ‘does not act out of motivation for prestige’ but at the same time, what it contributes to the region is not ‘philanthropy’. Interviewee 15 put things slightly differently: Australia does have a ‘desire to be taken seriously’ in a way that reflects its own self-perception as a player of consequence in international relations. This self-perception not unreasonable, added interviewee 15, as Australia was ‘well-resourced’ in a way that others in the region are not and ‘ambitious’ in the way that others perhaps should be.

Interviewee 2 argued that this search was complicated by the fact that Australia has several different leadership roles—that it ‘wants to be seen as a leader in at least four senses: as one of the US’s leading allies, as a leader of the Indo-Pacific grouping, as a leader in maritime Southeast Asia, and a leader in the Pacific’. They added that running through or beyond these roles was the ‘nebulous middle power stuff’ and alongside it was the narrower issue of wanting to be a leader in regional ‘maritime combat capabilities’.

At the same time, some interviewees did reflect on what might be called Australia’s leadership style. Interviewee 17 observed that Australia is not trying to ‘assert’ some ‘form of leadership’ and that its approach was more cooperative and ‘careful’. The objective was to ‘cultivate a collective response’ to China rather than to declare one.

None of the interviewees denied that Australia was committed to successful collective action in the Indo-Pacific or the individual regions within that broader space. They repeatedly used the word ‘pragmatic’ to refer to Australia’s approach and observed that Australia could and did work collaboratively at attaining concrete results. One interviewee (11) simply stated that Australia was ‘results-oriented’ and although it might gain status or recognition in the process of achieving those results, that was not the main objective.

4.4 Conclusion

In sum, the interviewees reported that Australia is today a proactive player in the region less motivated by recognition and more by achieving results. The next section turns to the question of how the Australian state approaches information and formulates responses to changed circumstances—specifically, to the question of how open Australia is to new information, whether it has the skills to process that information in ways that will produce positive outcomes, whether it has the confidence to manage that information and the skills to respond effectively.

A photograph of a Mission Operations Centre. Several people wearing headsets are seated at desks with multiple computer monitors. The room has a dark ceiling with recessed lighting and a wall with the 'SABER ASTRONAUTICS' logo. A large wall of screens displays various data and charts. The text 'MISSION OPERATIONS CENTRE' is visible on the wall.

MISSION OPERATIONS CENTRE

The logo for Saber Astronautics, featuring a stylized yellow and black symbol above the text 'SABER ASTRONAUTICS' in yellow and white.

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5 RESULTS:
PROCESSING
INFORMATION

5.1 Introduction

In this part of the project, we sought insights into how open or otherwise Australia is to new information, how adaptable or otherwise it might be when encountering information that did not fit with prior assumptions, how confidence or otherwise it is in its diplomacy and broader approach to the Indo-Pacific, and the sources of that confidence or lack of confidence.

In general, the informant reports we obtained agreed that Australia was generally confident, partly due to its relative wealth and power, partly because of the US alliance, and partly due to an underlying faith in Australian knowledge and abilities. Most interviewees also agreed that Australia could be adaptable when faced with changed facts and circumstances. Interestingly, however, the interviewees reported different approaches in different parts of the region. In particular, they suggested that Australia was more open to new information and more adaptable in Southeast Asia than in the South Pacific, where Australia retained strong prior assumptions about that part of the region and what was needed and was less open to changed circumstances or approaches.

5.2 Openness and adaptiveness

Q3. In your view, does Australia approach the region with a strong set of prior assumptions or does it assess challenges as they arise, on their merits? (Openness)

- How open is Australia to new information that might challenge longstanding views of the region and its challenges? (Openness)
- How well does the Australian government adapt when presented with new information? (Openness)

Responses to this question varied considerably in length and in the views expressed by the interviewees. The majority agreed that Australia brings to the Indo-Pacific a set of assumptions about how the region should be ordered. As interviewee 2 put it: 'Australia has a perpetual concern about the strategic equilibrium of maritime Southeast Asia' and the possibility that this equilibrium might be upset by a 'large unfriendly power'. This is the 'default lens' through which Australia sees the region, shaping or distorting how it views particular developments or relationships. Interviewee 18 argued something similar: Australia's 'key assumptions' were that the US must be the regional 'hegemon' and that the 'Liberal International Order' must prevail.

Several interviewees reported something similar in the Pacific. Interviewee 3 thought Australia brought a 'strong set of assumptions' to that region and a particular agenda, focused on certain ways of promoting human development and governance. Interviewee 14 observed something similar but added that Australia was now having to change its approach to focus more on infrastructure, and that Australia had been sluggish in realising that China was engaged in serious

talks to provide such things and slow to respond in kind. Interviewee 15 agreed with these views, saying 'Australia tends to go out into the Pacific with a set of assumptions and preconceptions about its relationships' that reflect a kind of 'donor-client' mindset. They acknowledged that Australia is trying to change this view and to reframe relations in terms of partnerships, but that, in their opinion, this was proving difficult to do.

Some interviewees—especially those working in Southeast Asia—reported that Australia's approach to Southeast Asia has changed over the past twenty years and that Australian officials were far more open to new information than their predecessors. 'In the past, there was ... bluster', said interviewee 8, but now officials were 'more consultative, more willing to show deference to countries like Indonesia' and to check and consult. Interviewee 17 said something similar, observing that there used to be a 'greater propensity to engage in megaphone diplomacy' but that Australia today was 'more circumspect', having learned the 'hard way' that being loud or assertive does not necessarily work. Interviewee 17 suggested that Australia had some to appreciate some of the value of Southeast Asian diplomatic conservatism, including the desire not to make public criticisms of other states.

Interviewee 4 went further, contrasting the approaches taken by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US to managing relationships in Southeast Asia after the AUKUS announcement. 'Australia was the only one', they said, 'that cared about what Southeast Asian thought', even to the point of being 'overly' or excessively 'concerned'. Interviewee 4 took this as significant, noting that they had 'always been impressed, especially in Southeast Asia, with Australians' ability to listen and adapt'. In that part of the region, they concluded, Australian officials were 'careful, thoughtful and reactive' almost to a fault, tending sometimes to be 'skittish'. Interviewee 7 reported something similar, but also noted how 'pragmatic' Australian officials could be, especially behind closed doors, in responding to Southeast Asian needs.

These views were not wholly shared by interviewee 1, however, perhaps reflecting interviewee 8's assertion that there is 'no one typical Australian approach'. They perceived that 'Australia was not as proactive as it should be' and that diplomats would come to their country assuming they 'already know how to do ... things'. 'Some diplomats who assume they know what they're doing wouldn't consult, wouldn't ask for help', they noted, 'then suddenly they realise they're not making any headway'. They would give the impression that they thought they knew 'what you need' instead of asking and that 'rankles some of our government officials ... who have a right to be treated as equals', said interviewee 1. Similarly, interviewee 15 argued that sometimes Australia 'doesn't take the region [Southeast Asia] as seriously as it should or doesn't listen as it should'.

The view that Australia understands Northeast Asia less well than other parts of the Indo-Pacific did emerge in some of the interviews. Interviewee 10 argued that Australia had 'been slow to wake up to the China threat, then overreacted'. They suggested that this may indicate an issue with Australia's strategic personality: that the Australian government may be slow to update its prior assumptions and then may be prone to 'over-correct' when it receives new information. Interviewee 13 was direct: 'I'm not sure Australia understands the region, the Asian states', they

observed, because Australia is an ‘Anglo-Saxon country’ and concerned mainly about interests. For those reasons, interviewee 13 argued, Australia struggles accurately to interpret China’s intentions and actions. We also heard these views from some diplomats interviewed during the research.

Some interviewees were very critical of Australia’s openness—or lack of it—in the Pacific. Observing from a distance, interviewee 4 was very blunt: when it came to that part of the region, they observed, there was a view that Australians ‘can be loutish’ and ‘imperialistic’, and that Australia ‘undermines its friends to maintain control’. In the Pacific, Australians are ‘very confident that [they] know better than anyone else except maybe the Kiwis, and there are only fourteen of them ...’.

Interviewee 3 tempered these criticisms. They pointed to the ‘knowledge base’ that Australia has about the Pacific and to the fact that Australia now has a ‘big and growing Pacific population’, which is helping Australia to ‘see itself as a Pacific country’.

5.3 Confidence and the sources of confidence

Q4. Does Australia approach the region with confidence? (Conscientiousness/Neuroticism)

- Is that confidence well grounded? (Conscientiousness)
- Is the source of Australian confidence a set of strongly held assumptions or a set of proven skills for understanding the region and its challenges? (Conscientiousness)

Most interviewees agree with the proposition that Australia approaches the region with confidence, but not with over-confidence. But some argued that underneath this confidence in diplomatic abilities was a lack of confidence about the region’s capacity to sustain security and prosperity. As interviewee 2 put it, straightforwardly: ‘I see Australia as ... a pessimistic actor’ and Australia as ‘simultaneously not confident enough about the region’s future and too confident about its ability to shape things’. Moreover, the interviewees disagreed about the sources of Australian confidence and about whether Australian confidence was well-founded or misplaced.

Some interviewees argued that Australian confidence varied across the region (interviewee 4, for example) and between agencies (interviewee 7), with different parts of government displaying different levels of confidence. Interviewee 9’s view was the majority one: Australia shows a ‘reasonable amount of confidence’ in the Indo-Pacific, but not too much. Interviewee 11 observed: ‘There is a certain amount of confidence, and it seems to be grounded in an ... understanding of the structural changes and institutional challenges in the region’. Interestingly, interviewee 17 argued that Australia’s confidence had stabilised in recent years, having oscillated between anxiety and over-confidence, as geopolitical competition had grown in the region.

There were some dissenters from these views. Interviewee 1 observed that Australian confidence could sometimes shade into arrogance and, at other times, the confidence masked a lack of substance. ‘The sense from here’, they said, ‘is that Australia might be approaching us with confidence, but the question is: for what?’. Interviewee 10 argued: ‘I don’t see them [Australia] acting out of confidence. I see them acting more out of fear or paranoia’. Interviewee 15 also pointed to what they called ‘a dark strain of anxiety and maybe self-doubt’ in Australia.

Some interviewees also reflected on whether Australian confidence was justified or misplaced. Interviewee 7 warned that sometimes the confidence was misplaced—that on some issues there were divergences of perceptions and interests that could not be overcome by a bout of diplomatic activism, for example. They pointed specifically to Australian efforts to explain AUKUS to Southeast Asian states. Interviewee 10 was more positive, highlighting Australia’s ‘proven skills’ in the Pacific.

When asked about the sources of Australian confidence or lack of confidence, the interviewees gave a range of responses. Interviewee 4 was unusual in observing that, in their view, Australia has a large community of knowledgeable and capable diplomats and experts for a country with a relatively limited population. Interviewee 7 reflected a more widespread view that Australian confidence was—at least in part—a function of ‘having the US ... as a last backstop’. Interviewees 9 and 15 also expressed this view. Interviewee 18 went further, arguing that the sources of Australian confidence were ‘clear ties with the US’, but also having a ‘modern, developed economy’, ‘technical skills’ useful to neighbouring countries needing capacity building, and good relationships with regional states, including Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore. Interviewee 8 pointed out that in Southeast Asia, at least, Australia’s confidence may be undermined over time, as its economic weight declines relative to that region. Concerning the Pacific, the interviewees reported that Australian confidence was above all a function of resources—Australia has funds to spend and skills to deploy in that part of the world.

5.4 Conclusion

This section of the project found that most of our interviewees saw Australia as confident about managing the challenges faced by the region and generally open to new information as it arose, despite some concern, expressed by some interviewees, that Australia was anxious about the future of the Indo-Pacific. There was some disagreement about the sources of confidence, however—about whether they lay in Australian analytical and diplomatic skills or in having powerful friends and relative wealth.

The next section explores Australia’s motivations and capacity to work effectively with others to achieve its ends, exploring what psychologists call ‘neuroticism’ and ‘agreeableness’ in the strategic personality.



Secretary of State Antony J Blinken meets with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong. (Wikimedia Commons)

6 RESULTS: MOTIVATIONS AND CHANGE

6.1 Introduction

In this part of the research, we sought informant reports about Australia’s aims and motivations, as well as about continuity and change in strategic behaviour.

In general, the interviewees described Australia as a state seeking stability and predictability in the region, aiming to uphold a rules-based order. They perceived Australia as state that sought to uphold frameworks and arrangements that permit problem-solving, rather than a state that tries to dictate or impose solutions. At the same time, they saw Australia predominantly self-interested, but aware that upholding a regional balance of power and maintaining an authoritative set of rules and institutions is beneficial to all states, including Australia. Finally, most interviewees observed significant changes in Australian behaviour in recent years towards a much more active approach to the region.

6.2 Australian aims

Q5. What do you think are Australia’s main aims, in terms of its regional diplomacy and strategy?

There was more variation in interviewee responses to this question than might have been expected, given Australia’s outspoken defence of the rules-based order in recent years. Some of this variation was due to sub-regional factors—interviewees based in Southeast Asia, for example, did not respond in the same ways to interviewees based elsewhere.

Some interviewees found this question difficult to answer. Interviewee 4 responded by saying:

I don't know ... my impression was, a few years ago [Australia] was seeking to bind itself to the region in order to improve trade, in order to build a networked region ... [but] ... now I wonder if, on the return of great power competition, Australia [has] reaffirmed being in the US camp [and] branched out to other partners.

Interviewee 2 saw ‘no real resting place’ for Australian strategy in the region, which means there is also ‘no end-point in military capability development’.

Most interviewees saw Australia’s aims as conservative. ‘What’s clear’, said interviewee 1, ‘is Australia is keen on keeping the region as it is’. Interviewee 14 went further and suggested Australia had adopted a ‘reactionary approach’. In any event, most interviewees argued that Australia’s aims were relatively limited. Many observed that maintaining regional stability—‘more than anything’, as interviewee 3 put it—was a central aim. Interviewees 11 and 13

agreed. Interviewee 8 simply said: Australia ‘wants the region to be predictable’. Interviewee 9 said ‘definitely now [the] primary motivation is keeping a stable Indo-Pacific region, one that is not threatened by conflict or hegemony’. Interviewee 17 added that these aims were not ‘radically different from [those of] others in [the] region’ since most states simply want to maintain their ‘strategic agency and autonomy’.

Many interviewees also agree that keeping the US engaged in the Indo-Pacific was a key Australian objective. Interviewee 10 argued that Australia wants to keep the US as a ‘regional hegemon’, as did interviewee 18. Others (13 and 15) talked about Australia trying to maintain a ‘US-led liberal order’. Interviewee 8 suggested that Australia wanted to ensure that the region was ‘amenable to [being] shaped by the West’. Some interviewees (e.g. 5) also talked about Australia’s concern to maintain ‘the rules’ and maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and to ensure there was ‘no dominant power in the region’. And there was also discussion of Australia’s growing desire to work more closely with ‘like-minded’ regional partners as well (interviewee 11).

A few interviewees saw Australia’s aims as unclear or as too broad. Beyond keeping the US engaged in the region, observed interviewee 10, Australia lacks a broader vision—‘everything gets very vague beyond’ that goal. It ‘wants to have it all’, said interviewee 7: to tap economic benefits from China, stick with an alliance with US, and play a significant diplomatic role in the region, all ‘without necessarily acknowledging that these choices have trade-offs’. They added that, in their view, this was ‘not well thought out’. For all this, interviewee 18 argued, Australia also aims at making sure it ‘always has a seat at the regional table’ and is seen as a ‘valued member of the region’.

6.3 Problem-solver or team player?

Q6. In your view, does Australia understand its role in the region to be solving problems or maintaining frameworks or rules that allow problems to be resolved collectively?
(Extroversion/Agreeableness)

The interviewees were divided on the question of whether Australia is and wants to be a regional problem solver or sees itself more as an upholder of rules, norms and institutions why which problems are solved collectively.

For some, this issue went directly to Australia’s place in the region. Interviewee 1 put it succinctly: ‘I personally do not know if Australia wants to be “in” or “out”—... it keeps looking over the wall and saying, I am part of part of this’ but instead of ‘going through the gate’ and staying there, it just hops over when it ‘sees someone doing something bad and I will go over and say something’. Interviewee 9 also suggested that Australia is conflicted about exactly

what to do and how to do it: Australia would like to ‘play a more active role’ but there was ‘uncertainty’ about what that might involve.

Interviewee 9 took a different view, arguing that the major challenges in the region demanded collective action and that Australia was actively engaged in that action. This view was also echoed by interviewees 8 and 11. Interviewee 2 offered a slightly different view: ‘I don’t think Australia sees itself as a problem solver [or] as a maintainer of frameworks to solve problems’. Instead, Australia is part of frameworks, ‘but they don’t solve problems. They provide venues for ... coordinated action’.

Interviewee 6 made a distinction between the way in which issues that were in Australia’s direct interest were handled and the way in which issues of less direct interest were managed. Singling out ‘boat people’ and counter-terrorism, Australia ‘pushes to get something done’ rather than waiting for others to act or working to build a regional consensus. Interviewer 7 agreed: Australia likes to ‘parachute in’ to fix problems that concern it, claiming it is acting according to the ‘rules-based order’.

Commenting on the Pacific in particular, interviewee 14 observed something similar: Australia does take time to ensure that the ‘system is working well’, in areas like the Pacific Islands Forum, but that it also acts independently when it perceives that it should or need to, acting as a ‘middle power’, with aid and development projects, for example. Interviewee 12 observed that Australia’s approach in Southeast Asia has evolved and it is now more circumspect about coming into the region and trying to solve problems. Interviewee 18 agreed, noting that in the past Australia had sometimes seen itself as an extra-regional problem-solver, for example in East Timor in 1999, but today is much more careful, and it ‘cannot be seen to be interfering’.

At the same time, interviewee 15 noted that in Australia and elsewhere in the region, there is a ‘recognition that it is getting harder and harder to point to successes coming out’ of ASEAN-based institutions and frameworks, which means that it may need to act more independently. They pointed to the work that Australia and others did to get the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership ‘over the line’ as evidence for this challenge and as evidence that Australia can and does play a positive role as a problem-solver. They also pointed to both AUKUS and the Quad as possible vehicles for problem-solving.

6.4 Risks or opportunities?

Q7. When Australia looks beyond its borders, do you think it sees a region characterised more by risks or threats or problematic states than one characterised by opportunities or partners? (Neuroticism)

Many interviewees argued that today, at least, Australia sees more risks than opportunities, but a significant number thought that Australia sees both. It depends, as interviewee 2 put it, ‘on which lens Australia is using’. Some did observe that in this dynamic context, Australia has found new partners or strengthened longstanding partnerships. And interviewee 1 observed that ‘Australian security policymakers should understand that there is a preference for Australian partnership’ in the Indo-Pacific region, not least because it is ‘an acceptable proxy for the United States’. At the same time, they warned, there is a ‘desire for Australia to be a more proactive defence and security partner’.

Interviewee 8 reflected the views of the majority in stating that ‘right now’, Australia sees more ‘risks and threats’ in the region than opportunities, but also observing that not long ago, it perceived more opportunities than risks. They quipped that Australia had now ‘gone back to the Forward Defence days’, implying that approach was grounded in the precautionary principle. Interviewee 15 agreed on this point, arguing that ‘the Australian discourse has become much more dominated by threat and risk’. But they noted Australia’s ‘risk assessment’ was still shifting and has not yet settled, pointing to differences in tone and substance between the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update.

These views were echoed by interviewee 17, but they argued that risks in the region were opening new opportunities for Australia and other regional states. There is a growing ‘appetite’ for cooperation across the Indo-Pacific and especially in Southeast Asia, as potential threats to the ‘autonomy’ of regional states have evolved. So, interviewee 17 concluded, there might be ‘risk in terms of the environment, but when it comes to the mitigation part, there is opportunity’. Interviewee 13 also suggested that changes in the region were pushing Australia to explore new opportunities, such a stronger trade and investment ties with ASEAN states or with India.

6.5 Interests and values

Q8. Do you see Australia as being predominately self-interested in terms of its diplomacy, focused narrowly on protecting Australian interests and/or values, or more concerned with upholding regional interests and values? (Agreeableness)

All the interviewees agreed—as expected—that Australia was predominantly self-interested, but none of them perceived this as unusual or as a major impediment to building and sustaining effective partnerships to uphold regional interests. Interviewee 5 argued that, of course, self-interest was always the ‘starting point’. Interviewee 10 remarked that Australia was ‘very self-interested, but who’s not?’ Interviewee 1 observed that Australia is self-interested, but that the region is ‘prepared to accept Australia on that basis’. Interviewee 17 concurred: ‘every country has its own self-interest’ but in Southeast Asia, at least, everyone approaches ‘Australia with eyes open’, recognising there is ‘a game to be played’.

Interviewee 2 agreed that Australia was ‘extraordinarily self-interested’ and that ‘doesn’t have many altruistic bones in its body’, but that national self-interest and regional interests could and often did ‘go together’. Other interviewees said similar things, with interviewee 6 suggesting that Australia was concerned with ‘regional interests and values’ beyond just self-interest, though conceding that this was likely because regional order was in the Australian national interest. Interviewees 8, 11 and 18 broadly agreed with that assessment.

Regarding Australia’s approach to the Pacific, in particular, some interviewees were critical or implicitly critical. Interviewee 3 argued that, for Australia, ‘the [Pacific] regional interest comes second, if it supports the national interest’.

A few interviewees reflected on values, as well as interests. Interviewee 7 argued that values ‘come second’ for Australia and that there is a widespread perception that Australia uses values ‘instrumentally’. They went on to suggest that as the regional environment grew ‘less forgiving’ it was becoming more difficult for Australia to ‘eat its cake and have it too’ when it came to pursuing interests and pushing its values at the same time.

6.6 Change over time

Q9. Has Australia’s approach to the region changed over time, in your assessment? If so, why? If not, why not?

All the interviewees agreed that Australia’s approach to the region or subregions has changed in recent years, most pointing to greater activism. Interviewee 13 noted that Australia’s Asia policy has been ‘entrepreneurial’ for some time—for fifty years or so—but that the activity has shifted from ‘regionalism’ to being both a regional ‘hegemon’ in the Pacific and being a ‘global rallying force against China’. This was a new kind of ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘initiative’. Interviewee 8 also observed that Australia’s policy towards China has become ‘strong’ and that this was the principal change and a ‘proper thing’. Interviewee 2 also observed the change from being focused on regionalism and multilateralism to being more focused on ‘bilateral relationships’ but noted that this was not necessarily a bad thing: Australia has been ‘quite generous’ in some of those relationships even if that generosity has sometimes gone ‘under the radar’.

This theme was also highlighted by interviewee 5. Before, they said, Australia preferred some kind of ‘splendid isolation’ from the rest of the region, but now ‘in the light of the Quad and AUKUS’ it was clear that it wanted something different. Australia wants to be engaged in the region but recognises that it needs partners. And interviewee 5 went on: ‘Australia should not be shy’ because there are partners willing and able to work with it. Interviewee 11 concurred with this view: Australia cannot remain ‘aloof’ and needs to be ‘outward oriented’—and if it is so, then it will find ‘like-minded’ partners with which to work.

Interviewee 17 noted that Australia was making progress with these kinds of partners. They observed that Australian diplomacy in the region was less 'assertive' than it had been after 9/11 and that 'megaphone diplomacy' had been replaced with something with a 'low profile'. There was now more 'circumspection' and diplomacy that was more 'mindful of regional sensitivities', as well as a 'much more pragmatic approach'. In parallel, Interviewee 18 made approving comments about Australia's recent reaffirmations of 'ASEAN Centrality' and the positive work done to reassure Southeast Asia after the announcement of AUKUS.

A few interviewees dissented from these views and argued that Australia might be adopting the wrong approach. Interviewee 15 pointed to a 'securitisation of how Australia engages with the region' together with a 'doubling down on the alliance'. Interviewee 7 also perceived a reversion to what they called 'old settings and relationships', including the US alliance, and mused: 'I don't know how long this is sustainable'.

The interviewees provided different answers to the question of why Australia's approach might have changed. China loomed large in many answers. Interviewee 6 suggested that the international environment now meant that Australia could not 'have its cake and eat it too'—it was becoming less amenable to Australia's interests. Interviewee 9 concurred: there were wider changes occurring in the world that Australia simply could not ignore, if it wanted to safeguard its prosperity and security. Interviewee 7 observed that Australia's relative economic weight was also declining and its society was changing, becoming much more multicultural, and that these factors were also significant, beyond just the question of China.



7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

Australia's strategic culture is commonly characterised as anxious, overly dependent on great and powerful allies, excessively concerned about threats, and favouring regional engagement and forward defence despite a sense of separateness from the region. In parallel, Australia's strategic personality has been described in various ways. Some think it is capricious and inconstant, undermined by domestic fractiousness and self-obsession, and lacking both imagination and independence (McCarthy 2019). Other see it more positively, as outward-looking, empiricist, and logical—as clear-sighted and pragmatic (Lyon 2019). And still others conceive it as over-confident, boorish, and macho, when it could and should be more sophisticated (Strating and Wallis 2022).

In our research, we have tried to generate and analyse some new data to assess these claims and provide a better-grounded understanding. Using an approach that combines Leadership Trait Analysis with the Big Five model, and drawing on informant reports, we have found that experts across the Indo-Pacific in regular interaction with Australian officials and analysts also have different views of Australia's strategic personality. But we were able to identify some widely held perceptions, reflected in the reports of the majority of the interviewees.

7.2 Australia and the Big Five

We have already summarised what the interviewees said in response to the questions they were asked. Here, to conclude, we will relate these responses back to the Big Five model and what our analyse suggests about Australia's strategic personality. The Big Five model directs us to these traits:

- *Openness to experience*—or openness to novelty, unfamiliarity, learning and innovation, combined with a tendency to be undogmatic.
- *Conscientiousness*—or displaying behaviour that is deliberate and purposeful, with a sense of individual and collective responsibility.
- *Extroversion*—or acting assertively and actively, leading or cooperating in collective action, motivated by gaining status or recognition.
- *Agreeableness*—or showing altruism and helpfulness; seeking to cooperate in a considerate way.
- *Neuroticism*—or sensitivity to threats and anxious about security; lacking confidence in engaging others

Our research suggests that regional experts perceive contemporary Australia to be relatively open to experience, generally conscientious, moderately extroverted and moderately agreeable, displaying some—but not necessarily excessive—neuroticism.

Especially in Southeast Asia, Australia's strategic personality is viewed as being activist and generally undogmatic. Our informant reports commonly observe that Australia's approach to that part of the region has shifted, even if Australia's basic aims—stability and security—have not. They indicate that changes have occurred that reflect *openness to experience*. Interviewee 4's comment about being 'impressed, especially in Southeast Asia, with Australians' ability to listen and adapt', even if they do arrive with a 'fair amount of assumptions', provides some validation for this assessment. So too does the comment from interviewee 8, who was generally more critical of Australia, that there is 'no one typical Australian approach' but that Australian officials were now 'more consultative, more willing to show deference' and to check and consult with their counterparts. Interviewee 17 suggested that this approach had emerged from experience—from lessons learned 'the hard way' in Southeast Asia, where 'megaphone diplomacy' can be unhelpful and a 'more circumspect' method works better. Either way, even critical informants pointed to openness to change, for example in interviewee 10's observation that Australia was 'slow to wake up to the China threat, and then overreacted'.

The clearest dissent to the view that Australia's strategic personality is open to change came with regard to the Pacific, where our informants reported that Australia could be less flexible and more dogmatic. Interviewee 15's view was representative: 'Australia tends to go out into the Pacific with ... assumptions and preconceptions about its relationships'. This assessment was qualified—'there is an effort to try and change that'—but it was still persistent. Concerning the Pacific, the view was also expressed that Australia was 'reactive' and not 'proactive', which still arguably reflects openness to new information, but which suggests that the openness is new and perhaps also overdue.

Australia is also perceived as being generally *conscientious*. The majority of the informants observed that Australia was very active in the region with a sense of individual and collective responsibility, principally for maintaining stability and security. Some commented on the scaling back of Australian ambition—interviewee 2 recalled the Australia of the 1980s and 90s, 'throwing out ideas' for the region, and contrasted it with more modest contemporary projects, like the Quad. But these comments were often contrasted with the scaling up of Australian activity. Interviewee 8, for example, noting that Australia was involved in 'lots of things', briefing and engaging across a broad range of issues. At the same time, several informants reported that, perhaps because of all this activity, Australia's aims were not completely clear. Interviewee 1 put this succinctly in their comment that 'we know they [Australian officials] want to bring something, to offer something, but sometimes we don't know what it is'. Interviewee 18 said something similar: 'sometimes there is question here ... about what Australia wants to do' and the answers are 'a bit unclear'. Interviewee 7 suggested that this might be a function of different departments having different priorities, hinting that Defence might not have the same aims as Foreign Affairs and Trade in some areas.

Our research also found regional observers see Australia as moderately *extroverted*, but there was some variation in the responses between views of Australian behaviour in Southeast Asia and in the Pacific. In the first part of the region, as interviewee 17 put it, Australia is ‘careful’ not to assert itself too forcefully. Instead, what it is trying to do is ‘cultivate a collective response’ to challenges, especially China, and to bring about ‘successful collective action’, but in a way that is ‘more humble’ than it might have been in the past. Interviewee 5 agreed: Australia wants to work in partnership and be seen working that way. But there are areas in which Australia is perceived as wanting to lead and to be seen as a leader, as interviewee 2 put it: as a leading US ally, as a champion of the Indo-Pacific concept and the Quad, as a security provider in maritime Asia, and in the Pacific. And with regard to that last part of the region, we found that almost all the informed analysts we spoke to viewed Australia as playing the role, or seeking to be recognised as, a regional leader, albeit with mixed success.

Our informant reports indicate that Australia is perceived as moderately *agreeable*. To be sure, almost all the interviewees observed that Australia was self-interested, but none of them saw anything out of the ordinary in that. Again, however, there was a split between perceptions of Australia in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In the first, even critical interviewees suggested that Australia wants to be constructive and cooperative. Some argued that Australia is yet to decide if—as interviewee 1 noted—it ‘wants to be in or out’. But most of the informants also noted that Australia wants to be ‘an initiator of things and an encourager of things’. As interviewee 2 put it, Australia ‘wants to be in the game’, but as interviewee 18 implied, Canberra knows that it does not set the rules. In the Pacific, the interviewees painted a different picture of an Australia that is closely involved, but an arguably less considerate way.

Finally, our research found the majority of the analysts we interviewed perceived Australia’s strategic personality to be characterised by some *neuroticism*. Here, however, views varied quite widely, but they did not all confirm the characterisation of Australia as dominated by anxiety often found in the literature on its strategic culture. Interviewee 10’s comment that they did not see Australia ‘acting out of confidence’ but ‘acting more out of fear or paranoia’ sat at one end of the spectrum of views. Interviewee 2’s argument that Australia is ‘largely a pessimistic actor’ that is ‘simultaneously not confident enough about the region’s future and too confident about its ability to shape things’ sat closer to the middle. Others argued that Australia displayed a degree of confidence and had good reasons to be confident. They observed that Australian officials and experts know at least parts of the Indo-Pacific very well and Australia has the capacity to affect aspects of the regional order, as well as ‘having the US ... as a last backstop’, as interviewee 7 put it, echoing the views of several other interviewees, as well as officials we engaged during the project.

7.3 Recommendations

Almost all the informants we interviewed during the project indicated that Australia's approach to the Indo-Pacific has changed in recent years and suggested Australia's strategic personality has changed during that time. Most of them viewed these changes as broadly positive and welcomed the idea of Australia playing a bigger and more active role in the Indo-Pacific, especially in Southeast Asia. And while this project did not set out to outline policy recommendations, the findings suggest some further changes could be made to further Australia's strategic interests. These include:

- Clarifying what we might call Australia's second-order objectives in the region, beyond upholding the rules-based order, maintaining stability, and pursuing prosperity. These include outlining Australia's preferred terms for relations with ASEAN and Southeast Asian states and the role that Australia would like to play in that part of the region. For some of our informants, this was crucial to making further progress, as Australia transitions from being a provider of development assistance to a broader security and economic partner.
- Learning lessons from Southeast Asia, where Australia has manifestly made progress in building broader and more robust partnerships, and applying them in the Pacific, where Australia is sometimes perceived as over-bearing and is now seen as pursuing approaches that do not align with local priorities. We recognise, of course, that Australia's interests in the Pacific are very different to those in Southeast Asia, being thinner and more tenuous. But we think this project has shown that—to adapt the terms from the Big Five model—the more open and conscientious diplomatic style developed in Southeast Asia pays dividends.

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