

EXAMINING SMALL AND MIDDLE STATES' BEHAVIOUR VIS-À-VIS RIVAL GREAT POWERS THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA

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<https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2021.3.8-22>

Abstract: One of the most significant questions in international relations today is whether the world is heading towards a new Cold War. It is important to examine this issue from the viewpoint of small and middle states, whose behaviour vis-à-vis the great powers during the Cold War basically consisted of siding with one or the other. Are we seeing the same behaviour today, or are small and middle states employing different strategies due to the different circumstances? This paper seeks to answer this question through a case study of Australia, a middle power, whose security is guaranteed by the US but whose main trading partner is China. While during the Cold War Australia clearly belonged to the US-led Western bloc, its situation in the current power struggle between the US and China is more complicated. The paper examines Australia's relationship with both superpowers and concludes that it follows a hedging strategy, whereby it maximises rewards from both sides while also preparing a fallback position in case circumstances change. This strategy is necessitated by the global economic interdependence that has resulted from globalisation. The study finds that Australia's strategy vis-à-vis the two rival great powers of today is different from its strategy during the Cold War. Many other small and middle states are hedging in a similar way, and this fundamental difference in their behaviour compared to the Cold War leads to the conclusion that there will be no return to a Cold War with clearly separate blocks.

Keywords: Australia, China, United States, hedging strategy, economic interdependence

Introduction

The past decade or so of international relations has undoubtedly been characterised by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, and it seems inevitable that the relationship between these two superpowers will continue to worsen. Many therefore believe that the world has entered a new Cold War (Dupont, 2020; Kusai, 2021). Others, on the other hand, dispute this, arguing that while we are heading towards a world with two main power centres, there are fundamental differences between the current era and the Cold War due to globalisation (Karabell, 2020; Christensen, 2021). In this view, one of the main differences is that the economic interdependence among countries brought about by globalisation makes the formation of competing blocks like the ones that existed during the Cold War impossible. Since the existence of two rival blocks was a fundamental characteristic of the Cold War, a world order without similar blocks could not be considered a new Cold War.

This paper seeks to contribute to the discourse about whether we are seeing a new Cold War by examining the behaviour of small and middle states vis-à-vis rival great powers under the current conditions. It does so through examining Australia's relationship with its security guarantor, the US, and its main trading partner, China. The question the study seeks to answer is whether small and middle states such as Australia employ the same basic strategies in relation to great powers as they did during the Cold War, or whether they adopt more complex strategies that are better suited to the current global economic interdependence resulting from globalisation. If they pursue the same strategies, then we might indeed be returning to a Cold War that is, from the viewpoint of small and middle states at least, essentially not different from the first one. If, however, the strategies of such states are different this time, this would be an indication that the current rivalry between China and the US is not a repetition of the Cold War, since an important (although underresearched) element of it, the behaviour of small and middle states, is different than it was back then.

The study first provides an overview of the alignment strategies employed by small and middle states that have emerged since the end of the Cold War. It then looks at how Australia's security relations with America have evolved,

followed by an overview of Australia-China trade relations. The next section examines the post-Cold War period, when Canberra believed it did not have to choose between the US and China. By maximising benefits from both partners, Australia pursued a hedging strategy. Next, the paper analyses the current tensions between Canberra and Beijing, which have marked the end of the era of not having to choose between its two main partners for Australia. Nevertheless, in spite of diplomatic relations hitting rock bottom, China remains Australia's main trading partner, and thus Canberra continues to hedge. The study concludes that Australia's hedging strategy is different from its strategy during the Cold War, and that economic interdependence implies that small and middle states' strategies vis-à-vis China and the US will not be the same as the ones during the Cold War.

Post-Cold War Alignment Choices and the Hypothesis

During the Cold War, the strategies employed by small and middle states in international relations basically consisted of allying with either the Western or the socialist bloc. In the 1980s and 1990s, the strategies of balancing (when a state forms alliances with other states in order to offset the power of an increasingly powerful state) and bandwagoning (whereby a state associates or allies itself with an increasingly powerful state) became the focus of the discourse of alignment. During the post-Cold War era, however, other alignment choices have emerged, and these alternative strategies (such as engagement, buckpassing, binding, soft balancing, limited-alignment, and hedging) challenge the dichotomy of the classic Cold War assumptions that a state will either balance or bandwagon (Kuik, 2016; Collins, 2013). The international relations literature has demonstrated that the main drivers behind these strategies are security-maximising and reward-maximising. The micro aspects of alignment behaviour, however, remain relatively understudied, despite the significance of the constituent components of states' alignment strategies and the interplay between them. They are important because any alignment choice always comprises several components, some of which are mutually complementary, while others are competing or even contradictory. Furthermore, the literature mostly focuses on the military aspects of alignment, even though the above-mentioned mixed strategies may place as much or even more emphasis on other

dimensions, such as economic or diplomatic ties (Kuik, 2016). The economic dimension is especially important in the age of globalisation and economic interdependence.

On the basis of these theoretical considerations, this paper assumes that the strategies of small and middle states vis-à-vis rival great powers have become more complex in the wake of globalisation and the resulting economic interdependence. To test this hypothesis, the study examines Australia's relations with the US and China since the beginning of the Cold War. It assumes that rather than simply balancing or bandwagoning, Australia, generally considered a middle power, has followed a strategy in the post-Cold War era that has allowed it to maximise rewards from both China and America.

Australia and the United States

Throughout its modern history, Australia has considered itself vulnerable to outside powers, and its solution to this problem has been to maintain close relations with powerful countries. Owing to its modern history as a colony of the United Kingdom, Australia naturally relied on the UK for protection until almost the middle of the twentieth century. This started to change in 1939, when prospects of war and the threat posed by Japan seemed increasingly real, and the turning point came in late 1941 (Bell, 2016), when the Australian Prime Minister declared that, in light of the dire straits the United Kingdom was in, "Australia looked to America" to counter the Japanese threat in the Pacific (Curtin, 1941). The fall of Singapore in early 1942 came as a shock and irreparably damaged confidence in the British Empire's ability to defend Australia (Baranyi, 2020). Once the Cold War set in, fear of a resurgent Japan and the spread of communism were the main drivers of the understanding that preserving Australia's security was of foremost importance (Frydenberg, 2015). It was now clear to the Australian political elite that the United States would be the best partner to guarantee Australia's security.

However, the US was initially not interested in a security agreement with Australia. Since communism had not yet spread to Australia's wider region, the US saw no reason for a security treaty with Australia. This changed with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, which transformed the US strategic approach to the region (Bell, 2016). This led to the ANZUS

(Australia, New Zealand, and United States) Security Treaty, signed in 1951 and in force since 1952 (The Avalon Project, 2020). The treaty meant that the world's most powerful country became Australia's security guarantor, greatly alleviating Australian anxiety about the restoration of Japan's sovereignty and the spread of communism following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Frydenberg, 2015).

The alliance with the US has never been questioned by Australia, although during the Cold War there were occasions when it was unpopular, most notably during the Vietnam War (Bell, 2016). Since the end of the Cold War the treaty has generally been considered indispensable in Canberra, which has been further reinforced by the Australian public's support of the treaty and the unrivalled superpower status of the US during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era. Australia has supported American military operations such as the first Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan, in which it did not have a direct stake because it is convinced it needs its 'great and powerful friend' to ensure its own safety. In Canberra's view, being a loyal ally of the US is the best way to guarantee Australia's security, since this way it can reasonably expect that America will come to its defence if necessary (Henry, 2020).

Australia and China

Australia did not recognise the newly established People's Republic of China in 1949, and relations between the two countries were hostile until the early 1970s. China was perceived as a sponsor of communist movements in Southeast Asia and a threat to Australia's security. This changed in 1972, when Canberra recognised the People's Republic of China as the sole government of China, which was followed by the quick development of diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations between the two countries (Sherlock, 1997). Even so, in terms of trade, during the Cold War China never accounted for more than 5 per cent of Australia's total merchandise trade, and its share was usually well below that figure (Australian Government, *The Treasury*, 2012).

Australia's trade relations during the Cold War reflected the country's historical ties with the United Kingdom as well as the fact that it was part of the Western bloc. After World War II, Australia's largest merchandise export market was the United Kingdom until 1965-66, when it was

overtaken by Japan, which retained its top position until the late 2000s, when China became the most important export market. The biggest source of merchandise imports between World War II and the late 1960s was the United Kingdom, when it was replaced by the United States. Excluding a brief period in the mid-1980s, when Japan became the largest source of imports, the US remained at the top until the mid-2000s, when it was overtaken by China (*Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, 2016).

China became Australia's main trading partner in 2007 (*Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, 2008). Its economic importance for Australia has been steadily increasing ever since, and it is largely thanks to China's robust demand for Australian raw materials and minerals that prior to the current Covid-19-induced crisis, Australia had not experienced a recession since 1991 (Feeney, 2018). China is Australia's most important trading partner both in terms of exports and imports: in 2020, 41 per cent of Australia's goods exports went to and 27 per cent of its goods imports came from China. Between 2015, when the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement entered into force, and 2020, the value of exports to China rose by 61 per cent, while the value of imports from China increased by 75.8 per cent. The importance of China for Australian trade is further highlighted by the fact that the value of both exports to and imports from China exceeds that of the next four most important partner countries put together (Csenger & Eszterhai, 2021).

“Australia Doesn't Have to Choose”: Hedging

However, in parallel with the growing importance of China, an uncomfortable contrast emerged between Australia's security and its prosperity due to the growing contest between its security guarantor and the country its economy was increasingly reliant on. For a long time, the Australian political elite pretended there was no contest underway between the US and China, an approach summed up by the foreign policy mantra “Australia doesn't have to choose between America and China” (White, 2017, p. 44). This notion had its roots in the 1990s: Prime Minister John Howard came to an agreement with China in 1996 that Australia, as an ally of America, would refrain from doing anything directed against China. It was easy to stick to this principle for a long time, since the US did not think of China as a strategic threat at the time. This changed

with Pivot to Asia, announced by US President Barack Obama in 2011, which involved the American expectation that Australia play a role in Washington's response to a rising China (White, 2017).

Australia found itself in a difficult situation: for the first time since 1972, when the US and China normalised their relations, Washington considered Beijing a rival and was asking Canberra for support in countering China. As opposed to the Cold War, however, Australia's position was more complicated now, since the great power competition this time was unfolding between its strategic partner and its main trading partner. In response, Australia fully supported Pivot to Asia in words, but when it came to actual involvement in it, Canberra was reluctant to contribute: for example, while it condemned China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea, it refused to join the American freedom of navigation operations aimed at countering them; despite Washington's objections, Australia eventually joined China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; and in spite of American disapproval of the Australian economy's openness to Chinese investments due to the vulnerability to Chinese pressure it entailed, Canberra did not take steps to stop or slow down the expansion of Australian-Chinese economic relations (White, 2017).

Australia continued its policy of "we don't have to choose between the US and China": it continued to rely on the US for its security and on China for its economic wellbeing, thereby maximising benefits from both sides. Security-maximising and reward-maximising were thus key considerations for Canberra. Australia's behaviour can be classified as hedging, which is defined as "an insurance-seeking behaviour under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change" (Kuik, 2016, p. 504). Hedging can be seen as a strategy between the two end positions of balancing and bandwagoning. It is characterised by mixed, ambiguous, and at times even contradictory components, exhibiting elements of both balancing and bandwagoning (Kuik, 2016). Since China's emergence as a rival to the US, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced increasing uncertainty due in large part to China's actions in the South China Sea aimed at changing the status quo in China's favour (e.g. creating and militarising artificial islands). Beijing's increasingly bold and assertive behaviour has created unease in Australia as well, as it is heavily reliant on the maritime

trade passing through the South China Sea and adjacent waters. China's unilateral steps in the region that disregard international law, freedom of navigation, and the rules-based international order in general have been a source of deep concern in Canberra. Therefore, they welcomed America's Pivot to Asia, although at the same time they tried not to get too involved in it due to their hedging strategy: while Australia continued being a loyal US ally (to ensure a fallback position in case China became outright hostile), it nevertheless attempted to avoid doing anything that might enrage Beijing and thus endanger trade with China.

Despite the growing tensions between China and the US, Australia's hedging strategy worked, and the country was indeed able to ride two horses at once. The Australian economy became highly reliant on China, and Australia was profiting handsomely from the two-way trade. Importantly, this had no effect on its alliance with America; Canberra overall had a good relationship with both Washington and Beijing.

Tensions in the Australia-China Relationship

The situation started to change in 2017, however, when it was revealed that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had warned the three main Australian political parties in 2015 that foreigners with close links to the Communist Party of China may be attempting to influence Australian politics (Kennedy, 2017). The ensuing scandal led to new legislation in 2018, aimed to make foreign influence in Australian politics and the government more visible to the public (BBC, 2018). Although the government denied it, the new laws were clearly aimed at China. In the same year Canberra banned Huawei from participating in the 5G rollout in Australia, citing national security concerns (Slezak & Bogle, 2018). As a result of these developments, the relationship between Australia and China became strained, with Chinese ministers refusing to communicate with their Australian counterparts.

The tense relationship between Australia and China sank to new lows after April 2020, when Australia called for an independent inquiry into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic (Scott, 2020). This infuriated China, and from May 2020 onwards it implemented restrictive trade measures (excessively high tariffs as well as import restrictions and bans) in relation to a range of Australian exports, such as barley, wine, beef, and coal (Rajah, 2021). Beijing

also discouraged Chinese students from studying in Australia, a popular destination for overseas studies (Hare, 2021). In late 2020, China made it clear that it blamed Australia for the deterioration in their relations; in Beijing's view, Canberra had in recent years interfered in China's internal affairs by making statements about Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, and they had unfairly rejected certain Chinese investments under the pretext of national security. Shortly afterwards a Chinese diplomat in Canberra handed a document to representatives of the Australian media that listed Beijing's grievances in 14 points (Scott, 2020). The implication was clear: China expected Australia to rectify its mistakes, otherwise bilateral relations would not improve.

Diplomatic relations between Australia and China have drastically deteriorated over the past four years, and especially since 2020. As China rises, it is becoming more assertive, and Australia is experiencing this more than most countries. In response to Chinese pressure, it has decided not to bow to the pressure but to strengthen its ties with the US and like-minded states. Australia is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), along with the US, Japan, and India (incidentally, Australia withdrew from the Quad's first incarnation in 2008 after China had protested over the grouping, deeming its economic ties with China too important to risk) (Wyeth, 2017). Last year Australia abandoned its long-held neutrality on the South China Sea maritime disputes and joined the US in rejecting Chinese territorial claims regarding the sea (Thayer, 2020). There are plans for enhanced American air force and navy presence in northern Australia (Jennings, 2021), and Australian-Japanese military cooperation was given a major boost in 2020 by a new defence pact (Takenaka & Park, 2020). Furthermore, in an extraordinary recent development, the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US will involve Australia building nuclear-powered submarines using American technology (BBC, 2021).

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has defiantly declared that he will never trade Australian values in response to coercion (Needham, 2020). It is true that Canberra has not made concessions to Beijing, but trade with China continues, even if not on the same level as before the Chinese trade measures. The value of Australian trade with China for nearly all industries decreased by 40 per cent in the second half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, but the overall value of trade

decreased by only 2 per cent thanks to iron ore, which China can only buy from Australia. Australian trade with the rest of the world decreased by 22 per cent during the same period, and therefore it seems it is not only the Covid-19-induced economic downturn that is at play in the case of Australian-Chinese trade (Doran, 2021). In the first half of 2021, exports to China increased each month (except for a small decrease in February), while imports from China remained more or less the same (*Australian Bureau of Statistics*, 2021). Despite the sharp downturn in Chinese trade for a lot of Australian industries, China is still by far Australia's most important trade partner in terms of both exports and imports.

In spite of the frosty Australia-China relations, the Australian government emphasizes that it wants to maintain Australia's trade relationship with China, hoping for dialogue with Beijing to resolve bilateral issues, even though Australian ministers' efforts to discuss the issues have been snubbed by their Chinese counterparts for some time (Sugiura & Takahashi, 2021). Australia's stance demonstrates that despite the political standoff with Beijing, it cannot afford a drastic reduction in trade with China without jeopardising Australia's prosperity. It simply cannot replace China as a trade partner. Of course, Australia is trying to diversify its trade – and a number of industries have more or less successfully managed to do so – in the sectors affected by Chinese trade sanctions, and other industries are also likely considering other markets as a contingency plan, but the country is nevertheless still reliant on China.

Conclusion

Australia's foreign policy during the Cold War was straightforward: it became an integral part of the US-led Western bloc after World War II and has been a staunch American ally ever since. Canberra's post-Cold War position, especially since the turn of the century, has been more complicated, however. While Australia continues to rely on the US for its security, it has reaped massive economic benefits from China. This is the outcome of the hedging strategy it has pursued. Australia has successfully maximised benefits from both sides, and Canberra is not changing its strategy even despite the intensifying contest between China and the US. The rivalry has not led to Canberra reducing relations with the former in order to further secure its position in the 'camp' of the latter. While Canberra is increasingly wary of Beijing's assertive behaviour,

it continues to be reliant on trade with China. Granted, the extent of this reliance has been reduced by China's punitive trade actions, but the country remains Australia's largest trade partner by far, and Canberra remains intent on improving bilateral ties. At the same time, Australia is preparing a fallback position, should its relationship with China drastically change: it is intensifying its relations with the US and building closer ties with other countries in the Indo-Pacific that are feeling increasingly threatened by China's conduct.

Australia's strategy vis-à-vis the two great powers is therefore more complex than the strategy it followed during the Cold War was. The hedging strategy it pursues demonstrates that security-maximising and reward-maximising are fundamental drivers of its foreign policy. In fact, globalisation makes hedging not only the most advantageous strategy for Australia, but perhaps also basically the only viable one, since the global economic interdependence that has evolved in the last three decades makes significant decoupling from China impossible. As we have seen, even the steady worsening of Australia-China relations over the last four years has not led to a serious break in the trade relations between the two countries. These results confirm the hypothesis of the paper that the strategies of small and middle states in relation to rival great powers have become more complex in the wake of globalisation and economic interdependence.

As we have seen through Australia's case study, economic interdependence implies that siding with one great power while minimising relations with the other is no longer a realistic option for most small and middle states, and therefore, like Australia, they are bound to hedge in some manner and to some extent. Indeed, many other small and middle states are also hedging, albeit in different ways and to a different extent: New Zealand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea, to name a few, are also wary of China and are thus strengthening ties with other states in case their relationship with Beijing seriously deteriorates. At the same time, they also have extensive economic links with China that they can hardly give up.

To conclude, the Cold War as we know it from history will not be repeated, since economic interdependence – with China being one of the economic centres of the world – will prevent the formation of the clearly

separate rival blocks seen during the Cold War. At the same time, more research is required into the alignment choices of small and middle states to better understand their behaviour in the era of growing competition between the US and China. Further studies on hedging behaviour like Australia's and other alignment strategies could contribute to a deeper understanding of how such states navigate the current tensions arising from intensifying great power rivalry.

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