SPECIAL REPORT

Australia's Strategic Thinking on the War in Ukraine, NATO, and Indo-Pacific Security

By Gorana Grgić

Leaders of the Indo-Pacific Four nations attend a meeing at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 12, 2023. (Photo by Paul Ellis/Pool via AP)

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Summary

- Russia's war against Ukraine has galvanized unprecedented support in both of Australia's major parties for deeper cooperation with NATO and its European allies across the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic theaters.

- When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Canberra imposed sanctions on Russia but ultimately saw Russia's actions as peripheral to Australia's core interests.

- Australia stepped up sanctions against Russia following the July 2014 killing of 38 Australians when a Malaysia Airlines flight was shot down by Russian-backed separatists over Ukraine.

- Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, Australia has seen Russia's actions as setting a dangerous precedent that might influence China's actions in the Indo-Pacific.

- As a result of this shift, Australia is now responding to Russia's war against Ukraine by working even more closely with NATO.

- Australia's growing relationship with NATO and support for Ukraine has set a strong precedent for collective action against any nation engaging in unjust aggression. Sustaining and expanding this cooperation will require significant political and diplomatic efforts.

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**CONFLICT
ANALYSIS &
PREVENTION**

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines how Russia's aggression against Ukraine has prompted a shift in the views of Australia's political leaders and security officials toward cooperation with NATO and Euro-Atlantic allies. Based on this analysis, the report provides recommendations for policymakers on how to strengthen and deepen cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters. The report was commissioned by the China Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, left, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speak with the media during a meeting of the North Atlantic Council with Partner Nations at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 12, 2023. (Photo by Pavel Golovkin/AP)

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has catalyzed significant foreign policy and security policy changes among US allies in the Indo-Pacific, and it has galvanized cooperation between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific allies in a way that might have been unimaginable just a decade ago. Australia, Japan, and South Korea have all cited Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a critical juncture prompting major reviews of their own capabilities; seeing parallels between Russia's present aggression and the potential for China's escalation across the Taiwan Strait, they have committed to strengthening their relationships with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and NATO member states.[1] This is a major difference from when the Obama administration's announced "pivot to Asia" was seen as part of a zero-sum game, in which European allies and partners saw the US prioritization of the Asia-Pacific as an affront to European security.[2] Thus far, the United States' high-profile support for Ukraine has not raised analogous concerns among US allies in the Indo-Pacific. If anything, these allies seem to have responded in a dedicated fashion, not only supporting Ukraine on their own but also finding common purpose by aligning with NATO in Ukraine's defense.

Australia is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Canberra has provided both lethal and nonlethal military assistance to Ukraine, the latter in part through NATO's Ukraine Comprehensive Assistance Package Trust Fund.[3] It has also placed sanctions on Russia and condemned Moscow's actions in concert with NATO allies. This kind of support by Australia and other Indo-Pacific allies is beneficial to US interests because it fosters a cross-regional approach to Ukraine, strengthening the collective response to Russian aggression. The Biden administration has been a strong advocate for cross-theater cooperation between US allies and partners from the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, which aligns with the central tenet of the US national defense strategy—integrated deterrence.[4] It is advantageous for the United States and NATO when allies in both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific align, share information, exchange best practices, and enhance interoperability. These actions, facilitated by NATO platforms, promote a unified and effective approach to global security challenges, thereby bolstering the overall strategic posture of the United States and its allies and partners. Australia in particular—a strong past contributor to NATO operations and the only NATO partner among US Indo-Pacific allies to enjoy enhanced access to NATO cooperation opportunities—is critical to such alignment between regions.[5]

This report analyzes Australia's response to the war in Ukraine over the past decade, and in particular its cooperation with NATO, in order to examine Canberra's strategic thinking with respect to cross-theater cooperation. Based on a survey of available primary and secondary sources, the report argues that the Australian government's approach to the war has shifted since the beginning of the violent conflict in 2013 and 2014, and that the role it has sought for itself in the context of cooperation with NATO has likewise shifted. Namely, ever since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Australian governments from the two major parties—the center-left Labor Party and the center-right Liberal Party—have been much more supportive of deepening cross-theater cooperation. This support has been evidenced by changes in Australia's discourse about the importance of Euro-Atlantic security for Indo-Pacific security and about Australia's partnership with NATO, as well as by its provision of military, financial, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

In brief, although Australian political elites a decade ago did not see the security developments in Ukraine as bearing major and consequential implications for Australia's own security, they have dramatically shifted their views since February 2022. Key government and opposition figures alike have cited several reasons to explain Australia's strong support for Ukraine. First, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is seen as a direct challenge to the rules-based international order to which Australia's strategic identity as a middle power commits it; Australian policymakers cite the need to stand up for the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, Australia's political culture is rooted in democratic norms and values. Australian leaders' public statements and policy declarations demonstrate that they see the war in Ukraine as a manifestation of the global struggle between democracies and autocracies, which necessitates a strong response to Russia's aggression and deeper cooperation with NATO as an alliance of

democracies. Third, Australia's support for Ukraine also serves as a strong signal to China about Canberra's stance on potential conflict escalation that would be in breach of international rules and norms, such as a Taiwan crisis; this point has been explicitly stated by political leaders. All three of these justifications underscore the utility and relevance of cross-theater cooperation. It should also be noted that Australia's commitment to cross-theater cooperation is pragmatic, aiming to establish the country as a reliable ally and partner for the United States and other NATO allies in future contingencies.

The findings of this report are significant for Australian policymakers as well as for their US and NATO counterparts. For the Australian policy community, the report provides a comprehensive overview of how current policies can be interpreted in the context of cross-theater cooperation efforts. For Australia's allies and partners, it elucidates the domestic factors driving Australia's Ukraine and NATO policy responses over the past decade. Recognizing these factors is crucial for understanding Australia's role as an ally and partner—and ultimately for reinforcing cross-theater cooperation and strengthening collective security efforts, both now in relation to Ukraine and in the future more generally.

The Downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17

Australia closely observed the developments in Ukraine after the political crisis erupted at the end of 2013, and it aligned its actions with those of the United States, the European Union, and Canada after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in early 2014. The Australian government introduced financial sanctions and travel bans, condemning Russia for attempting to "steal" Ukrainian territory. Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop disputed the legitimacy of the Crimean status referendum, in which voters chose to make Crimea part of the Russian Federation; she maintained that it was conducted under Russian control and not authorized by Ukraine, and indicated that 12 Russian and Ukrainian individuals involved in threatening Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity would be targeted with sanctions.[6]

Yet it could be argued that Australia only truly woke up to the threat posed by Russia's revanchism and military aggression on July 17, 2014. That afternoon, a Russian-supplied Buk missile killed all the passengers on board Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur as it flew over the territory of eastern Ukraine, which was controlled by Russian-backed separatists. Among the 298 passengers and crew, 38 were Australians. The Australian government reacted swiftly. Within a week of the incident, Prime Minister Tony Abbott had announced a major operation by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to secure and identify the bodies from the flight. The policy objectives of Operation Bring Them Home were "to retrieve the bodies, to secure the site, to conduct the investigation and to obtain justice for the victims and their families."[7]

However, this operation was not without controversy. Before any AFP officers were sent to Ukraine, there was talk that they would be accompanied by Australian Defence Force (ADF)

Flowers and toy animals lie at the base of a memorial to Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on the tenth anniversary of its downing by Russian-backed separatists over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. The memorial to the 298 passengers and crew killed, including 38 Australians, is at the crash site near the village of Hrabove. (Photo by AP)

personnel. This approach was met with great skepticism in Europe. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte told the Dutch Parliament that though the prospect was tempting, he was concerned about the possible ramifications of sending troops to Ukraine.[8] Others around the continent were less diplomatic and deemed the proposal "nuts," on the grounds that a military presence would inevitably "be seen as a provocation by the separatists and the Russians."[9] On the other hand, some Australian strategists defended the proposal, saying that Australia's status as a non-NATO member and its geographical distance from Europe would be conciliating factors. "We are not sending the army over there to take on the Russians or separatists," ran one argument. "It's not a European country interfering in another European country's business. It's a country from the outside that has experienced a significant loss of life of Australian people and permanent residents."[10] Ultimately, given the assessments of what Australian military deployment to a war zone might signal, the decision was made to send only the AFP along with Dutch police personnel. The victim recovery and investigative processes continued for several years. Retrospective assessments concluded that the operation had been extremely risky and that it was only by sheer luck that no Australians had been killed as they entered an active war zone.[11]

For the remainder of 2014, Australia stepped up its engagement with various European coun-
terparts in order to sanction Russia for its role in the downing of MH17. This effort could also be
interpreted as an early recognition by Australia of the importance of cross-theater cooperation,
which would later become more pronounced. Actions included lobbying on the part of Foreign
Affairs Minister Bishop, Defence Minister David Johnston, and Trade Minister Andrew Robb to
ban Russian President Vladimir Putin from the G20 leaders' summit in Brisbane later in the year.[12]
The ban was on the agenda of the Australian delegation's meetings at the NATO summit in Wales
in September and was a focus of diplomatic engagement in forums such as the United Nations,
where Australia was a nonpermanent member of the Security Council in 2014.

When the efforts to have Russia banned from the G20 summit failed, Abbott famously pro-
claimed he would "shirtfront" Vladimir Putin when he saw him.[13] He later moderated the rhetoric,
asking for a formal apology and compensation for the victims' families. Ultimately, Putin made it to
Brisbane with some Russian Navy vessels in tow off the Queensland coast but cut short his stay
at the summit. In November 2014, Australia formally opened an embassy in Ukraine and soon af-
terward hosted President Petro Poroshenko for the first state visit of any Ukrainian leader—steps
that showed strong diplomatic support for the country.[14]

Australia-NATO Cooperation
before February 2022

Australian cooperation with NATO was established long before the downing of MH17. Between
2001 and 2014, Australia made one of the largest non-NATO contributions of personnel in sup-
port of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. (NATO took over
leadership of ISAF in 2003.) Australian forces led a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Uruzgan,
while the Special Operations Task Group provided direct support to ISAF during various phases.
In 2013, Australia formalized its partnership with NATO through an Individual Partnership and
Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which focused on crisis and conflict management, postconflict
contingencies, reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.[15]

Moreover, during this period, the Abbott government was pushing to increase Australia's
global security role.[16] The 2014 NATO summit in Wales was crucial in paving the way for NATO-
Australia cooperation beyond Afghanistan as Australia became elevated to the status of
Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP). The EOPs are a select group of NATO partners that have
gained access to interoperability initiatives and opportunities for dialogue and consultation with
NATO allies. The granting of this status reflected Australia's established cooperation and signif-
icant military contributions to the alliance and its growing security cooperation with a range of
NATO member states beyond traditional allies such as France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and
Spain. Yet the prevailing assessment at the time was that NATO would remain preoccupied with
the Russian challenge for years to come, while Australia would have to focus on the changing
threat environment and new security realities in its own region. Paul Dibb, a former Australian
defense intelligence official and one of the nation's foremost Russia experts, wrote in 2018 that

his warnings about Russia posing a threat to the international order were regarded in Australian policymaking circles as "alarmist."[17]

For Canberra, Russian expansionism in Ukraine was a strategic development worth noting but was ultimately peripheral to the core interests of Australia's intelligence and policy elite. Thus, some in the Australian strategic policy community were actually wary of Australia's closer relations with NATO as a gateway to full membership. One warning, for instance, was that stepping up cooperation with NATO would "imply a radical reorientation of [Australia's] strategic priorities"—signifying that Australia had no strategic interest in responding to potential Russian aggression in, say, the Baltic states or Poland.[18] The ADF's capability was said to be too small and the force too lightly equipped for any such endeavors. Furthermore, NATO's presence in the Indo-Pacific in response to the threat of conflict was already being cited as unnecessarily provocative toward China.

Nonetheless, in the years between the downing of MH17 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several developments occurred that added ballast to Australia-NATO relations, even if Australia was no longer as sharply focused on security developments in Eastern Europe. Between 2014 and 2019, Australia continued to act in lockstep with most NATO member states in sanctioning Russia's malicious foreign policy actions and military assertiveness. It introduced targeted autonomous sanctions over Russian threats to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, expelled two undeclared intelligence officers in 2018 in response to the Russian government's role in the nerve agent attack against former MI6 agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in England, and repeatedly called out Russia's aggressive cyber activities. Australia also joined NATO member states and the broader coalition in Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State in 2014, and it later contributed to advisory and capacity-building efforts led by NATO in Iraq. In 2015, Australia joined Ocean Shield, NATO's counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.[19]

As European states began at this time to take a stronger interest in security developments in the Indo-Pacific, Australia was identified as one of the key partners in their nascent regional strategies. (France was the first mover in this space in the context of European NATO states.)[20] Furthermore, NATO's institutional stance on China began shifting around this time, and in 2019 the alliance stated that China's "growing international influence" and military might presented a challenge that needed to be addressed.[21] At this point, relations between Australia and China also became marred by controversies, allegations, and disagreements over issues ranging from China's influence operations in Australia and large-scale human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China to a continued ban on the use of Huawei equipment in Australia's wireless communications network. Over time, these changes led to greater alignment between European and Australian perceptions of China.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defense Minister Richard Marles stand between UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, left, and Defense Secretary Ben Wallace, right, on February 1, 2023, during a visit to southwest England where they observed Australian forces supporting a UK-led effort to train Ukrainian troops. (Photo by Ben Birchall/Pool via AP)

The Impact of February 2022 on Australia's Strategic Thinking

Australia's primary response to Russia's war against Ukraine was to provide military and humanitarian aid and to work in unison with allies and partners in NATO to impose a range of sanctions on the Russian Federation and its political and military elites. These actions built on the foundation of cooperation in the years prior to 2022. Interestingly, the amount of support Australia provided to Ukraine came under scrutiny after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, returning from the NATO summit in Madrid in June 2022, claimed that Australia had been "the largest non-NATO contributor" to Ukraine.[22] This assertion was based on the provision of military equipment, cash to upgrade border controls, duty-free access for Ukrainian imports to Australia, intervention at the International Court of Justice, financial sanctions against Russian "ministers and oligarchs," and a prohibition on imports of Russian gold. But the claims did not entirely withstand rigorous testing against the best available data on single-country donations

> Those in favor of stronger cross-theater cooperation have noted that when the rules-based international order is eroded, the ramifications go beyond the theater of origin and extend globally.

of humanitarian, financial, and military aid. By these measures, Australia ranked around the middle of non-NATO donors in the amount of overall aid, while leading in the provision of military aid among the countries outside the North Atlantic alliance.[23] In any case, the sustained support for Ukraine reflects a bipartisan consensus, since Australians elected a new Labor government in May 2022 after nearly a decade of Coalition (Liberal Party and National Party) rule. Albanese as incumbent prime minister stated that Australia stood ready to support Kyiv "for as long as it takes for Ukraine to emerge victorious."[24]

So far, officials from both sides of the Australian political spectrum have articulated their support for Ukraine based on three rationales that demonstrate the importance of cross-theater cooperation. The first relates to Australia's identity as a credible middle power committed to preserving the rules-based international order.[25] Russia's invasion of Ukraine directly challenges this established order. Russia's violations of sovereignty and abuses of international law are seen as dangerous precedents that need to be sanctioned lest they become the new normal. This explanation for supporting Ukraine has emerged as the predominant rationale and is frequently cited by Australian policymakers to explain the country's foreign policy response, which is consistent with NATO's official stance.[26]

The second rationale grows out of Australian political culture, which is steeped in democratic norms and values. This culture allows the country's political leaders to present support for Ukraine within the narrative of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies—a narrative that resonates not only among political elites but also among the broader populace.[27] Indeed, Australian political leaders consistently affirm that responding to human suffering across the world is encoded within the country's foreign policy DNA. Furthermore, Albanese has stated that the Australian government would welcome increased military cooperation both with NATO directly and within NATO's Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) format, adding that "democracies need to stand up for the rule of international law [and] our values."[28]

A third rationale for Australia's sustained backing of Ukraine and intensified collaboration with NATO—a rationale that is sometimes implied rather than articulated explicitly—is that it serves as a signal to China. Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that in offering support to Ukraine, he was "as concerned about Beijing as [he] was about Moscow."[29] In essence, should Russia's aggression in Ukraine face minimal opposition from Western democracies, China could perceive this as a signal to become more assertive in the Indo-Pacific region. Part of what concerns the Australian foreign policy and security community is the growing entente between Russia and China, evidenced by the countries' 2022 announcement of a "no limits" partnership;[30] this is seen as broadly threatening to democracies, and in 2022 Albanese made this point to NATO leaders.[31] Opposition Leader Peter Dutton was explicit in comparing China and Russia as aggressors, and expressed hope that if China encroached upon Taiwan, Australia could mobilize Western nations to put pressure on China, just as they were doing in the case of Russia for its actions in Ukraine. He even indicated the possibility of providing military support to Taiwan akin to the assistance Australia was extending to Ukraine.[32]

In the context of post-2022 Australian security and defense discourse, those in favor of stronger cross-theater cooperation have noted that when the rules-based international order is eroded, the ramifications go beyond the theater of origin and extend globally. Whether committed by Russia or China, violations of this order necessitate a global or cross-theater response. Supporters of cross-theater cooperation have also argued that the alignment of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping is perilous for democracies in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific alike; they believe that the push toward building up military capabilities and societal resilience in both theaters will aid the building of coalitions to counter threats emanating from Russia's and China's expansionism.[33] They have welcomed NATO's investment in innovation to strengthen all member states across precisely the technology domains China seeks to seize, such as artificial intelligence, cyber, space, and hypersonic missiles. Likewise, they have been supportive of NATO states' efforts—individual and collective—to increase support for capacity building in the Indo-Pacific in order to improve local forces' ability to detect and resist China's encroachments.

Even in the years before Russia's escalation to a full-scale war in Ukraine, there was a trend toward rhetorical convergence and increased political and security cooperation or coordination among key Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security players.[34] Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was stressing the importance of Australia's cooperation with NATO as early as 2018: "In the face of security threats and strategic competition, we need to defend and extend the rules-based structures that have enabled our common peace and prosperity. And in that task NATO has no more steadfast partner than Australia." Moreover, in a vein that sounds much like recent statements from the heads of IP4 governments, Turnbull asserted that

> our economic and security interests are interconnected. Like NATO, the Australian government is acting to preserve the security on which our prosperity depends. . . . Now more than at any time since the end of the Cold War, NATO is central to that task of maintaining the security, the compliance with the rule of law, that is the foundation for our freedom and indeed of our prosperity.[35]

Such statements ring even truer for Australian political actors in the wake of February 2022 and signal opportunities for even greater cooperation across theaters.

Yet while Australia's two biggest political parties agree on supporting Ukraine and growing the partnership with NATO, some voices within the broader Australian strategic community still doubt the practical reality or sustainability of cross-theater cooperation. They argue that as long as there is war and instability in Europe, there is a good chance that NATO member states would be unable or unwilling to back up the alliance's interests in the Indo-Pacific in the event of conflict there.[36] Some are even concerned about Washington's ability to "walk and chew gum"—that is, they worry that the United States again might find itself distracted from the Indo-Pacific by European crises.[37] These types of arguments are predicated on the idea that Europeans remain far away from any meaningful defense integration that could make a difference in Asia, even if they could help leverage economic, technological, and financial power against China in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. Some of these arguments are based on the long memory of European betrayal embodied by the fall of Singapore in 1942.[38] Retired politicians are the most vocal dissenters on the value of NATO's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific and the deepening ties between NATO and Australia.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating and former Attorney-General George Brandis have pointed to a range of potential perils arising from these arrangements—from harm to the existing security architecture to the creation of a security dilemma in the region.[39] However, while such views garner media attention, they have not seriously shaken the existing bipartisan consensus on closer cooperation with NATO that undergirds cross-theater cooperation.

Continuing Australia's Support for Ukraine

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has profoundly affected Australia's strategic thinking and public opinion, resulting in a unified national commitment rarely seen within pivotal NATO member states or partner countries. To date, Australia has provided Ukraine with a total of approximately AU$1.5 billion (about US$1 billion) in support, the bulk of which has been allocated to military assistance.[40] In the third year of Russia's war on Ukraine, and in the context of debates among observers regarding the sustainability of Western support, Australians continue to display remarkable levels of solidarity toward Ukraine and to be steadfast in backing various forms of assistance. Thus, to understand Australia's support for Ukraine, it is important to understand more than just the views of policymakers. The way the conflict resonates deeply with everyday Australians must also be considered.

In surveys conducted by the Lowy Institute in 2023 and 2024, almost 9 out of 10 respondents (87 percent and 86 percent, respectively) "strongly" or "somewhat" support "keeping strict sanctions on Russia." This figure has held relatively steady since 2022 (89 percent).[41] Likewise, a June 2023 poll conducted by Resolve Political Monitor for the *Sydney Morning Herald* found that a large majority of Australians polled (over 75 percent) favored either maintaining or increasing the country's support for Ukraine. Only 9 percent wished to reduce or withdraw support.[42] Among respondents to the Lowy surveys, at least 8 out of 10 (84 percent in 2023 and 80 percent in 2024) endorsed "admitting Ukrainian refugees into Australia," while three-quarters (76 percent in 2023 and 74 percent in 2024) endorsed "providing military aid to Ukraine." Although the percentage who "strongly" support these two measures decreased noticeably between 2022 and 2023, it remained steady for sanctions and military aid. Strong support for "admitting Ukrainian refugees into Australia," however, dropped six points between 2022 and 2023.[43]

In 2022, a significant majority of Australians polled (87 percent) expressed concern regarding Chinese-Russian cooperation, with over half (56 percent) indicating they were "very concerned" about the relationship between the two countries. That same year, 68 percent identified Russia's foreign policy as a critical threat to Australia's interests, elevating it to the foremost of the threats asked about. As the Lowy Institute noted, "This represents a remarkable 36-point jump since 2017."[44] In 2024, 46 percent of Australians rated Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a critical threat, a larger share than those citing the conflict in the Middle East (41 percent of those polled).[45] Similarly, Russia remains the least trusted global power among those surveyed (trusted "a great

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy address the media in Kyiv on July 3, 2022. Albanese's secret visit to Kyiv and surrounding towns occurred about four months after Russia's full-scale invasion. (Photo by Nariman El-Mofty/AP)

deal" by only 8 percent of respondents). Trust in Russia sharply declined following its invasion of Ukraine and is currently 30 points lower than in 2017.[46]

Given these and similar survey results, it is hardly surprising that the Australian government has so far kept its promise to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes." While officials have been reluctant to divulge exact delivery dates, citing operational security reasons, they have said they are considering expanding assistance to Ukraine amid expectations that the war will be protracted. Some of the most visible and effective facets of the military aid have been the provision of Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicles, which played a vital role in the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in late 2022, along with M777 155 mm lightweight towed howitzers, howitzer ammunition, and DefendTex D40 drones.[47] Moreover, on the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Australian Department of Defence announced it would provide additional uncrewed aerial systems to the Ukrainian armed forces.[48] About a year later, in March 2024, Australia joined the Drone Coalition to support Ukraine's defense needs.[49] Then, on July 10, 2024, Australia signed a memorandum of understanding with coalition members Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, and the

United Kingdom to establish a framework for "joint procurement for rapid and efficient drone deliveries" to Ukraine.[50] In addition to these measures, the ADF's Operation Kudu has trained over 2,000 Ukrainian military personnel. (Operation Kudu supports a UK-led training mission, Operation Interflex, which in turn has trained more than 45,000 Ukrainian personnel.)[51]

Yet some recent developments in the provision of military support to Ukraine have sparked controversy and partisan disputes in Australia, though not necessarily in ways seen in other major donor states. For instance, when the Albanese government pledged an additional AU$100 million in late June 2023 in the form of an aid package—which included 28 M113 armored vehicles, 14 special operations vehicles, 28 trucks, 14 trailers, and additional artillery ammunition—Opposition Leader Dutton criticized the government for offering "unfit" military equipment to Ukraine and characterized the package as a "garage sale" of unwanted items.[52] Dutton expressed bewilderment over the government's decision not to send Hawkei vehicles, which were requested by Ukraine and produced in Australia. In turn, Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong defended the aid as a substantial contribution to Ukraine and accused the opposition of playing politics.[53] However, military experts have raised questions about the aid package's effectiveness and deemed it underwhelming given the inclusion of "obsolete" vehicles, some of which date back to the Vietnam War.[54]

More recently, in late April 2024, Defence Minister Richard Marles announced an additional AU$100 million in Australian funding and supplies for Ukraine in response to Kyiv's urgent call for increased international support. The package included AU$50 million for short-range air defense systems, AU$30 million for drones for the Ukrainian military, and AU$15 million for non-lethal military equipment.[55] Again, the opposition urged additional measures that would address Ukraine's request for more coal shipments and provide soon-to-be retired Abrams tanks and any usable elements from the retired Taipan helicopter fleet.[56] (The Albanese government eventually approved the transfer of 49 aging Abrams tanks, valued at AU$245 million, to Ukraine on October 17.)[57] Two spokespersons for the Opposition Coalition—Simon Birmingham for foreign affairs and Andrew Hastie for defense—also called for more specifics regarding the "source and timing" of the commitment.[58] They questioned whether the funding was new budget support for Ukraine or a reallocation from the "already stretched" Australian defense budget, and sought clarity on the timeline and origin of the arms deliveries.

Criticism about insufficient resourcing has also emerged from within the government's own party ranks. Much of this criticism has centered on Australia's failure to reopen its embassy in Ukraine at a time when over 60 other nations, including Canada, the United States, and Japan, have reopened theirs. Labor MPs have condemned the government for keeping Australian diplomats, including Ambassador Paul Lehmann, in Warsaw, Poland.[59] Critics have argued that this is a political issue rather than a security concern. Meanwhile, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has stated that the embassy's status is under regular review and that any decision to return to Kyiv would be based on thorough security and risk assessments.[60]

During the NATO summit in Washington in July 2024, the Australian government announced its largest military aid package to date, valued at approximately AU$250 million.[61] While the exact quantity and types of weaponry were not disclosed to avoid benefiting Russia, the

assistance was said to include air defense missiles, air-to-ground and anti-tank weapons, guided munitions, artillery, cannon, and small arms ammunition.[62] Defence Minister Marles emphasized Australia's steadfast support for Ukraine, stating, "Australia is proud to stand with its partners at this historic NATO summit to demonstrate our unwavering commitment to the government of Ukraine."[63]

In September 2024, the Australian Senate published a report on the country's support for Ukraine following an inquiry that commenced in March 2024 with the objective of "identify[ing] ways in which Australia can refine its support and . . . support Ukraine to defeat the Russian invasion by working together with allies and international partners." The inquiry received more than 200 submissions from the public and private sector, the "overwhelming majority" of which strongly supported aid for Ukraine. The report highlighted concerns about totalitarian regimes and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific as key reasons for supporting Ukraine. It also made 22 recommendations urging the Australian government to boost both military and humanitarian aid through a multiyear package to provide Ukraine with additional military equipment (including retired assets) and to establish a more strategic, centralized approach to managing aid and coordinating aid and support for Ukraine across government agencies. Notably, the report recommended lifting restrictions on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets within Russia.[64]

It is thus reasonable to expect that Australia's support for Ukraine will be sustained, given robust public backing and a strong bipartisan consensus for coordinating with European partners to continue to provide aid. Recent political debates between the government and the opposition have centered on whether aid from Australia is sufficient, not on whether it is excessive. Such a focus suggests that the issue is unlikely to become a point of significant political contention. It also underscores the profound impact that Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has had on Australia's strategic thinking and illustrates a unified national commitment that has not been observed in many of the pivotal states within NATO or those partnering with it.[65]

Conclusion and Recommendations

In offering an overview of Australia's response to the war in Ukraine since 2014, this report finds convincing evidence of a change in the way European security developments are perceived in Canberra. Whereas Russia's expansionism and aggression in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 were seen as peripheral to the core interests of Australia's intelligence and policy elite, the escalating large-scale warfare that began in 2022 is considered more central, and in response Australia is making common cause with allies and partners in the Euro-Atlantic theater. This response has been most evident in the provision of military, financial, and humanitarian aid and in official rhetoric. It could be concluded that the benefit of cross-theater cooperation, underscored by the acuteness of the war against Ukraine and its implications, has significant buy-in from Australian political leaders from both major parties, a number of foreign policy elites, and the general public. Of course, as has been demonstrated and as could be expected, there are also voices expressing doubt about the practical realities or sustainability of cross-theater cooperation, and these views might gain more traction as war fatigue or concerns over potential risks and trade-offs increase.

Several recommendations stem from the analysis presented above.

The first set of recommendations is pertinent for both US and NATO policymakers. As far as political circumstances allow, Washington should continue to encourage Australia's deepening relations with NATO and European allies; it should leverage existing platforms for collaboration on security and defense-related matters in frameworks such as the NATO-IP4 and through bilateral and minilateral security arrangements with key European powers. NATO's bolstering of cross-theater security cooperation among US allies and partners is integral to defense and deterrence against threats posed by China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, individually and collectively. In addition, NATO policymakers should leverage Australia's commitment to cross-theater cooperation by advancing systematic dialogue with Australia and the other IP4 partners about defense and deterrence dynamics in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. NATO should also prioritize working with Australia to achieve the goals outlined in the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) it signed with Australia in 2023. (The ITPP is an upgrade from the IPCP agreement that NATO and Australia entered into a decade earlier.)[66] The NATO summit in Washington in July 2024 showed that relations between NATO and Australia are on an upward trajectory. Australia and the other IP4 partner countries have signed on to four new joint projects to deepen cooperation on Ukraine, artificial intelligence, disinformation, and cybersecurity.[67]

For Australian policymakers, there are three recommendations pertinent to Australia's continued support for Ukraine and commitment to broader cross-theater cooperation. First, the incumbent Australian government should acknowledge the possibility of aid provision becoming politicized in a manner that might curtail such expenditures. This risk is particularly relevant in the event of significant adverse changes in economic conditions, shifts in conflict dynamics, or unforeseen events in the Indo-Pacific region. Instead of asserting an indefinite commitment to supporting Ukraine, the Australian government should engage in meticulous planning to prepare for the potential emergence of these scenarios and align them with long-term Australian interests both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Second, and in a closely related context, it is imperative for the Australian government to prepare for the change in the US presidential administration or a shift toward more adversarial relations between branches of the US government. Such changes could lead the United States to be less generous in providing aid to Ukraine. Australia should therefore formulate contingency plans to ensure that its support for Ukraine remains steadfast even in the face of evolving US policies. Recent debates in the US Congress about aid to Ukraine have not significantly influenced the discourse in Australia, but there are no assurances this will always be the case.

Third, a proactive response to the challenges posed by evolving geopolitical dynamics necessitates ongoing and transparent public communication. It is essential to educate the public about the benefits and significance of fostering deeper cross-theater cooperation, not just in relation to Ukraine but more generally. This education should extend beyond immediate policy concerns and encompass broader strategic objectives.

On the methodological front, two areas warrant attention in future research. First, there is a need for more in-depth investigation, undertaken through content and discourse analysis, of how support for Ukraine is framed in Australia and beyond. A particular focus of this research

could be the parallels drawn between the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and potential future aggression against Taiwan. Some initial observations have emerged from a preliminary examination of speeches and statements by key foreign policy figures, including the prime minister, defense minister, and foreign affairs minister, but the focus could be broadened to include the debates within the legislature and interbranch exchanges on this matter.[68]

Second, conducting additional interviews with Australian foreign policy experts and leaders is advisable. This would clarify their perspectives on whether enhanced coordination and collaboration among Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific allies, as witnessed in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, can act as a deterrent with respect to Taiwan. Interviews could also help ascertain whether such collaboration is realistic or sustainable in the long term. The present consensus appears to be that cooperation should focus on domains such as emerging technologies and the coordination of economic strategies in addition to the traditional multilateral deterrence measures. Further discussion with foreign policy elites could shed light on evolving strategies and priorities in this critical geopolitical landscape.

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Russia's war against Ukraine has spurred closer cooperation between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific states and organizations, particularly Australia and NATO, signaling a deepening of ties that could have long-term benefits for global security. A decade ago, Australia viewed Russia's belligerence mostly as a European issue, but the full-scale invasion in 2022 shifted this perspective, highlighting the dangers of unchecked aggression and its potential implications for the Indo-Pacific. Australia's growing relationship with NATO and support for Ukraine has set a strong precedent for collective action against any nation engaging in unjust aggression. There is no doubt that sustaining and expanding this cooperation will require significant political and diplomatic efforts. Yet over the long term, such alignment is crucial for ensuring that nations like Russia face real consequences for violations of international law and for signaling to other potential aggressors that global coalitions are prepared to respond.

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