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The Australia-New Zealand alliance: introduction to the special section

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It is difficult to think of two countries more closely aligned than Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade describes the neighbours as 'natural allies with a strong trans-Tasman sense of family' (DFAT n.d.). New Zealand's Ministry of Defence says that New Zealand has 'no better friend and no closer ally' (MoD 2016, 32). In his comments following the 2024 Australia-New Zealand Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations (ANZMIN), Australian deputy prime minister and defence minister Richard Marles stated that: 'the character [of the relationship] between Australia and New Zealand is one of family. There's no country in the world with whom we are closer than New Zealand' (Marles 2024).

In many respects, the perceived – and in many contexts, practical – closeness between Australia and New Zealand has positive consequences. It means that the two countries can largely take their foreign and defence cooperation for granted, be it on humanitarian and disaster relief in the Pacific Islands region or on providing diplomatic support for each other to gain a seat on the United Nations Security Council. As we outline in our article, the first in this special section, the two countries' bureaucracies and police forces also cooperate closely, as do their private sectors and regulatory bodies. People-to-people links are broad and deep, with more than half a million people born in New Zealand living in Australia. Very little of the handwringing that take place in Canberra about the steadfastness of its other ally, the United States (US), takes place between Canberra and Wellington. For many citizens of both countries, it is unthinkable that the two countries would not support each other in a crisis. This was well-illustrated in February 2023 during the response to the Cyclone Gabrielle in New Zealand, when integrated search groups were called 'Anzac teams'.

But, as we argue in our article, the perceived and practical closeness of Australia and New Zealand can also mean that their alliance is so taken-for-granted that it is seldom analysed, with policymakers and scholars on both sides of the Tasman assuming that it is unchanging, and that the other country will always share their view of the world and be available to assist when needed. This is largely true, but with the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region evolving rapidly and tensions between the US and China

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escalating, it is important to put the alliance under the analytical spotlight to check whether these comfortable assumptions still hold and identify what challenges may lie ahead.

In this special section we bring together experts from both sides of the Tasman to examine the Australia-New Zealand alliance, as part of our broader ARC Discovery Project examining its operation and endurance. These experts were among those who participated in workshops we convened in Canberra (in November 2023) and Wellington (in February 2024), to share their views of the alliance. These experts' discussion articles represent a spectrum of views from both sides of the Tasman, united by an acknowledgement of the importance of the alliance to both countries, but with differing perceptions of how the alliance should operate in the future, how it should shape each countries' foreign and strategic policies, and of how it has influenced how their policies and behaviour in their shared region of special interest, the Pacific Islands.

The process of convening these workshops itself told us a lot about how the two countries view their alliance. In Australia we had difficulty identifying scholars who work on the alliance, and ultimately we invited scholars who primarily focus on Australia's alliance with the US, since they are well-acquainted with the scholarly literature on alliances. We were grateful to the generosity of these scholars, who sought to make their broader research relevant to the Australia-New Zealand alliance. But the dearth of scholars writing about the alliance in Australia revealed how few people in the Australian foreign and strategic policy space are thinking about, and ideally, researching, Australia's alliance with New Zealand. This may be partly because many Australian thinkers have come to see New Zealand primarily through the lens of the Pacific Islands region, rather than of broader importance to Australia's foreign and strategic policy. As New Zealand diplomat Rob Laurs observes in his contribution to this special section, New Zealanders 'interacting with the Australian government may be surprised to find responsibilities for the New Zealand bilateral relationship sitting within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Office of the Pacific' (specifically within the Pacific Partners Branch in Pacific Strategy Division) and Department of Defence's Pacific Division.

We had less difficulty identifying scholars interested in the alliance in New Zealand, particularly as the question of New Zealand's foreign and strategic policy relationship with Australia was (and still is) garnering significant attention in the context of debates about whether New Zealand should seek to join pillar II of the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom (UK)-US) trilateral security partnership. Reflecting Australia's importance to New Zealand, the bilateral relationship is managed by the standalone Australia Group within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and straddles both the Ministry of Defence's Pacific Division and its Policy and Planning Division, with the latter handling the broader alliance relationship. In many ways this dynamic reflects the tripartite nature of the US-Australia-New Zealand alliances: Australia is occupied with retaining the attention and support of the US, while New Zealand is increasingly concerned with maintaining its relevance to Australia.

While Australians' attention may be focused northward, not eastward, this does not mean that the Australia-New Zealand alliance does not warrant greater attention. As Brendan Taylor suggests in this special section, there is a need to deepen and strengthen the alliance, and wider relationship, through dialogue exchanges, university study centres, and university curriculum. Indeed, there are currently few formal mechanisms

to foster policy and academic understanding beyond the infrequent Australian Strategic Policy Institute – Centre for Strategic Studies track 1.5 dialogue (the last of which was in 2018). Australia has two (part)government-funded university-based think tanks devoted to studying its alliance with the US – the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and the Perth USAsia Centre at the University of Western Australia – but no comparable research centre focused on its alliance with New Zealand. The government-funded Pacific Research Program and the Pacific Security College, both at the Australian National University, have no specific research programs focused on New Zealand. There is a clear need for a separate, dedicated New Zealand studies centre in Australia, linked to a counterpart in New Zealand. Two examples stand out. First, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, which has 15 university partners across both countries, offers executive education and research programmes in public administration. However, for prospective university students of the alliance, there are fewer opportunities to study in-depth the relationship at the undergraduate level in either country. Second, the Defence-funded Australian Civil Military Centre’s Deputy Executive Director position is filled by a New Zealand Government representative, reflecting ‘the strong historic, strategic and cultural ties between Australia and New Zealand and the requirement to work closely on civil–military–police matters’ (ACMC n.d.).

As we acknowledge in our article, we are conscious that the settler-colonial identities of the two countries are a defining feature of the alliance and that this in turn is reflected in the scholarship on the relationship. Equally we acknowledge that as settler-colonial scholars our understanding of how Māori and First Nations Australians perceive and experience the alliance is limited and we recognize that this is an important area for future research and dialogue.

Another interesting dynamic we identified during our research was the willingness of diplomats and officials on both sides of the Tasman to speak freely to us, which reflects both the closeness of the relationship, and the broader value placed on bridging the policy-academia divide. We interviewed diplomats and senior officials in both countries, and representatives from each high commission attended our workshops in both capitals. We also interviewed New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, but Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong declined to be interviewed. While the Australian officials made valuable contributions, it became clear that their New Zealand counterparts felt much freer to speak and to give more definite opinions. That a New Zealand diplomat, Rob Laurs, was given approval to contribute to this special section further demonstrates that New Zealand officials appear to have more scope to speak publicly on these matters.

The papers

This special section begins with a full-length article by us in which we answer the question: what does the apparent relegation of the strategic significance of Australia’s relationship with New Zealand to a *partnership* in Australia’s 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* tell us about the status of the Australia-New Zealand *alliance*? We argue that the depth and breadth of Australia and New Zealand’s defence, economic, regulatory, and people-to-people cooperation and integration has made their relationship ‘intuitive’ (to quote several officials on both sides of the Tasman). That is, Australia and New

Zealand's relationship has come to be seen as part of 'the natural order of things', so that the two countries see each other as 'a natural, permanent partner, parting company with whom is unthinkable' (Suh 2004, 152). But, we also argue that the intuitiveness and tendency of leaders and commentators on both sides of the Tasman to 'romanticize' the alliance (Ayson 2018), may prevent the two neighbours from recognizing and responding to tensions (Hopf 2010). To address this, we examine differences between the two countries' perceptions of themselves, their strategic interests, and their alliance and find that execution of alliance commitments and the management of expectations (for example, Canberra's frustration with Wellington over under-spending on defence) will continue to test their relationship. However, we conclude that these tensions will not fundamentally undermine the relationship and that the two countries ultimately share the same – stated – dreams.

The special section then moves to a series of discussion articles by several of the participants in our workshops. The first, by Australian academic Michael D. Cohen, analyses the origins of the ANZUS alliance. Cohen argues that, while the ANZUS allies share similar interests or threat perceptions today, this was not the case when the alliance was created. While Canberra and Wellington assumed that their participation in the Korean War was decisive for gaining Washington's security guarantee, the US instead saw ANZUS as a vehicle to get 'Canberra and Wellington's buy-in to a Japanese peace settlement that ensured that Tokyo would be firmly ensconced within the Western camp'. Reflecting this, Cohen argues, the 'Americans always intended their specific commitment to the alliance to be ambiguous, which essentially caused the Australians (and to a lesser extent the New Zealanders) to pull their hair out trying to establish what the alliance actually committed the Americans to do'. New Zealand felt this fear of abandonment less acutely because '[g]eography has opened the door to New Zealand in some sense free riding on Australia', or as Laurs observes in his article, New Zealand 'won a geographic lottery'.

The second discussion article, by New Zealand diplomat Rob Laurs, provides a New Zealand perspective of the Australia-New Zealand alliance. Laurs outlines the breadth and depth of the alliance, and broader relationship, particularly in the Pacific Islands region, but argues that, while the two countries are 'strategically aligned to a greater degree now than any other time since the middle of last century, New Zealand is not a 'mini-Australia'. Instead, Laurs outlines the 'untapped strategic value' of New Zealand to Australia, capable of acting as a 'force multiplier', bringing a 'pragmatic and realistic clarity to certain strategic problems', and similarly 'permanently invested *in*' the Pacific Islands region, but with New Zealand possessing 'strategic intangibles' that can aid the Pacific policies of both countries. Laurs therefore calls for greater strategic integration between the allies, in which 'the two countries can mutually reinforce one another'.

In the third discussion article, Australian strategic thinker Hugh White answers the provocative question we asked him to address at our Canberra workshop: what can Australia learn from New Zealand in making its foreign and strategic policy? White acknowledges the commonalities between the two allies, but observes that they have 'taken often separate, and sometimes divergent, paths in navigating the region and world'. However, facing what White describes as 'the most consequential shift in their international setting since European settlement', White argues that Australia and New Zealand have 'had trouble comprehending the scale of the shifts in our strategic circumstances, and the

questions that arise as a result'. While New Zealand has is 'less psychologically dependent' on the US, it has assumed that Australia 'can be relied upon to maintain the strategic weight needed to defend itself and New Zealand if worst comes to worst'. White describes this as 'a serious overestimation of Australia's strategic weight now and in the future', to which New Zealand will have to adjust. Nevertheless, White argues that Australia could learn from New Zealand's 'modest ... realism' about its power and influence, but also Wellington's 'quiet confidence', 'bloody-mindedness', 'craftiness', and 'patience' in its pursuit of core interests.

In the fourth discussion article, New Zealand academic Bethan Greener considers how Te Tiriti o Waitangi informs, and could inform, the perception and praxis of the trans-Tasman alliance. Greener argues that, while recent New Zealand governments have 'emphasized the importance of relationships with 'like minded' countries', including Australia, a commitment to te Tiriti could 'temper this Anglo-outpost focus'. This commitment would also 'necessarily bring questions of self-determination and the status of indigenous people, particularly in settler colonies, to the fore', raising important questions for both New Zealand and Australia, both at home and in the Pacific Islands. Indeed, Greener identifies the parallels between Māori concepts of partnership and relationships and those discussed by Australian First Nations scholar Mary Graham in the special issue on Indigenous diplomacy published in this journal in December 2023 (Brigg and Graham 2023). As Greener concludes, '[s]eeking to live up to the partnership promises inherent in Te Tiriti would better equip Aotearoa New Zealand to succeed, and the same could be said for our trans-Tasman cousins, whilst a willingness of Australasian governments to engage in genuine partnerships both within and without would be an exponentially empowering force in foreign affairs for both'.

The fifth discussion article, by New Zealand-born Australian-based academic Brendan Taylor, argues that three trends are causing 'strategic divergence' between Australia and New Zealand. The first is that Australia's growing preference for new security groupings, such as the AUKUS security partnership and the Quad (between Australia, India, Japan, and the US) has led to a sidelining of Australia's alliance with New Zealand. The second is that the 'strategic personalities' of the allies are diverging due to widening gaps between their defence expenditure and their differing relationships with the US. The third is that the allies have 'different visions of Asia's strategic future', with Canberra favouring a US-led 'free and open Indo-Pacific', while New Zealand is more open to an-ASEAN inspired 'Indo-Pacific outlook' that emphasizes the role of multilateralism and regional rules and norms. Taylor praises the establishment of the annual Australia-New Zealand Ministerial Consultations (ANZMIN) as a first step to managing these differences, but as noted above, he calls for the creation of a regular track 1.5 or second track dialogue and seconds our call for funding for a new research program focused on the Australia-New Zealand alliance to conduct 'rigorous research and more regular, candid dialogue'.

In the sixth discussion article, Australian academic Darren Lim and European scholar (but Australia-based) Walter Brenno Colnaghi take as their starting point Allan Gyngell's observation that 'Australians tend to feel economically secure but strategically vulnerable; while New Zealanders, sheltered against the east coast of that landmass but with a more limited base of natural resources, feel strategically secure but economically vulnerable' (Gyngell 2018). Contra Taylor, Lim and Colnaghi argue that, while Gyngell's assessment still holds, 'the policy differences between the two antipodean states are

flattening, likely caused by the strategic challenges posed by China's rise' heightening their respective perceptions of insecurity. Drawing on the empirical analysis outlined in their accompanying appendix, they measure the differences between Canberra and Wellington's strategic posture towards Beijing across seven policy areas between 2017 and 2024: bilateral security cooperation with China; bilateral economic cooperation with China; tactical approach to managing conflicts of interest and disputes with China; leaders' public communications regarding China and bilateral relationship; strength of national security equities in domestic policy; strategy and tactics in managing China's influence in third countries; and security cooperation with third states. While their analysis bears out Gyngell's observation, they find that both countries are now more strategically and economically insecure, and that their worldviews have converged, as have their policy settings as they manage their responses.

In the seventh discussion article, New Zealand academic Jason Young also considers the influence of China, with a focus on New Zealand's foreign policy. Young argues that China's developing strategic role has 'underlined the importance of the alliance partnership' with Australia for New Zealand and, as Lim and Colnaghi conclude, led to a recalibration in the allies' China policies. Young argues that this shift has been most noticeable in New Zealand, which has moved away from its 2012 'NZ Inc China Strategy', which prioritized the economic relationship. Under the Luxon government, New Zealand's approach to China now echoes that of Australia's longer-standing position that it will 'cooperate with China where we can, disagree where we must and engage in our national interest' (Albanese 2023). However, Young argues that divergences (although they have narrowed) between the two countries' China policies are important, particularly the value of 'loyal opposition', which in the context of the alliance 'requires loyalty to the shared goals of the alliance but also respects an independence of view and action'. Young therefore shares White's belief that Australia can, at times, learn from New Zealand's approach, in this case in its 'careful messag[ing]' to China.

The eighth discussion article, by Australian researcher Elizabeth Buchanan, uses the case study of Australia and New Zealand's approaches to Antarctica to examine their relationship. She argues that, while they share interests in maintaining the Antarctic Treaty and have a long history of scientific cooperation in Antarctica, they are, at times, 'competitors for Antarctic-activities'. This is particularly the case when it comes to working with the US, to which New Zealand provides most support in Antarctica. In contrast, Australia has historically provided support to China for its Antarctic activities, although tensions between Australia and China saw China shift to New Zealand for support in the 2023/2024 season. In turn, the US is rethinking its reliance on New Zealand, given the vulnerability of Christchurch airport to earthquakes. Buchanan concludes by arguing that Australia and New Zealand 'should seek to 'share the load' when it comes to Antarctica', particularly on 'cost-sharing and joint basing options', but also to 'promote the spirit and letter of the Antarctic Treaty' in the context of deepening strategic competition reaching the continent.

In our ninth discussion article, New Zealand academic Robert Patman focuses on an issue that dominated our conversations during our workshop and fieldwork in New Zealand: whether New Zealand should seek to participate in pillar II of the AUKUS security partnership. Patman argues that New Zealand should seek to bolster its security ties with Australia, but that 'this should not be conflated with any expectation that the

country should join AUKUS'. Patman raises five objections to New Zealand joining AUKUS: that it will be difficult to sell domestically; that AUKUS is unlikely to protect the international rules-based order; that it would 'disturb the country's very important trade relationship with China'; that it could undermine the perceived independence of New Zealand's foreign policy, including its non-nuclear policy; and that it distracts from other international security threats, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, Patman argues that New Zealand should increase defence spending and identify non-AUKUS related ways to enhance its defence ties with Australia.

In our tenth discussion article, New Zealand academic Reuben Steff is concerned about great power competition causing a 'deteriorating strategic environment'. Steff therefore argues that New Zealand should seek to engage with AUKUS pillar II to: access advanced military technologies; remain interoperable with Australia; benefit from potential economic innovations arising from technological exchanges; and to enhance deterrence against future conflict with China. While Steff acknowledges concern about the implications of joining AUKUS pillar II for New Zealand's trade with China, he is optimistic both that 'New Zealanders may be willing to put up with some material pain in exchange for standing up for principles' and that New Zealand can diversify its trading partners to reduce its reliance on China's market.

Another New Zealand academic, Cathy Downes, is similarly supportive of New Zealand joining AUKUS pillar II in our eleventh discussion article. Downes argues that many critiques have focused on pillar I of AUKUS, Australia's development of nuclear-powered submarines, which has distracted them from what she sees as the far greater strategic potential of pillar II, both in terms of the development of emerging technologies and as a catalyst for a 'broadening international network of partners that goes well beyond the narrow goal of containing China'. Like Steff, Downes identifies possible commercial benefits from access to potential technological innovations under AUKUS pillar II. Downes also shares a concern that remaining outside AUKUS pillar II might widen the capability gap between New Zealand and Australia, which may in turn reduce 'the NZDF's value and trustworthiness as an effective, safe, interoperable, professional partner'.

In our twelfth discussion article, Samoan New Zealand academic Marco de Jong focuses on the implications of New Zealand's potential membership of AUKUS pillar II for its relationships in the Pacific Islands region. de Jong argues that these debates are part of New Zealand's 'broader, renewed alignment with the Anglosphere', including with Australia, the US, and the UK's strategic assessments and interests. This has necessitated the New Zealand Government seeking to 'manage down its commitment to aspects of an independent, nuclear free, and Pacific-led foreign policy'. de Jong is concerned that joining AUKUS pillar II could pressure New Zealand to adopt a more confrontational stance towards China, to align with that of Australia, the US, and UK, which he argues would generate unease in the Pacific, where several leaders have expressed their concern about growing militarization in and around the region. Relatedly, as pillar I of AUKUS involves Australia developing nuclear-powered submarines, de Jong argues that it could set 'nuclear proliferation precedent', and that through its connection to pillar II New Zealand could be perceived to be stepping away from the anti-nuclear commitments shares with Pacific Island countries. He is also concerned that the greater emphasis on security signalled by AUKUS, and the broader Indo-Pacific policies in

which it is nested, has changed how AUKUS member countries engage with the region, which could displace New Zealand's 'Pacific-led engagement' and the Pacific region's own conceptions of security.

Our final discussion article, by New Zealand academics Nicholas Ross Smith and Laurant Bland, also focuses on the implications of New Zealand's potential membership of AUKUS for its relationships in the Pacific. Smith and Bland argue that current debates about New Zealand joining AUKUS pillar II overlook the impact on New Zealand's relationships in the Pacific Islands region. They argue that former Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta's Māori foreign policy was primarily targeted at the Pacific and signaled a 'deeper ontological alignment' with Pacific Island countries. For them, the current debate about AUKUS has 'ignored deeper ontological questions' about how relying on Australia and the US as sources of New Zealand's security aligns with 'New Zealand's unique positioning as both a Western ally and a Pacific nation'. They therefore argue that New Zealand should focus on 'the true existential threat to New Zealand and the Pacific, which is not China's rise but rather climate change' to offer 'a constructive alternative to the escalating great power competition in the region'.

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