Introduction

Today, when we look at the structure of international relations, we see that the system has undergone a radical change. It can be said that in addition to changing power balances and power capacities of countries, power elements have also changed, parameters that were not in the past have gained importance, and some elements that were considered vitally important have become increasingly insignificant.

Especially the Cold War, which ended in 1990, constitutes the main core of mentioned change. However, the fact that the United States of America (USA) gained an ideological advantage with the victory over the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and became a hegemonic state did not guarantee the development of geopolitical balances in favour of it. In fact, at the end of 10 years, Asia took the first steps to challenge the Atlantic order. Russia’s rise, which started in the 2000s, was followed by China in 2010, and both countries cooperated to transform the unipolar global system into a multipolar one.

The country that made the biggest contribution to the beginning of the rise of Asia was undoubtedly China. Mao Zedong, who founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, leaving behind an era called the “century of humiliation”, took the first step towards modern China. Beijing, which recovered its economy over time and developed a model compatible with the West, became the country with the
strongest economy after the USA with the cultural and economic expansion it started in 1978.¹

Xi Jinping, who took office in 2013, further developed the legacy of his predecessors and initiated a proactive foreign policy. Abandoning the peaceful ascension policies of the rulers of the past, Xi embarked on an effort to revive the Chinese nation to realize the “Chinese dream”.² For this purpose, “Made in China 2025”, Military-Civil Fusion Strategy, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Xi, have been important projects to expand the sphere of influence of the Beijing administration.³

China’s transition from a soft and harmonious policy that it has followed for many years to a strategy that serves the purpose of establishing a more realistic and gynocentric order has formed the main fault line of the current power struggle. In particular, the process that started with the election of Donald Trump as the President of the USA in 2016 created economic, diplomatic, and military tension between China and the USA. The competition, which emerged mainly due to China’s attempt to control the geography starting from its territorial waters to the eastern coasts of Africa, brought the Indo-Pacific, which is the main geography of today’s hegemony debates, to the agenda. Parallel to the rise of geography, the increasing importance of the countries in the region drew attention. In this sense, one of the prominent countries has been Australia.

Australia’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

Surrounded by the Indian Ocean to the west, the Pacific Ocean to the east, and Southeast Asia to the north, Australia is located at the centre of Indo-Pacific geography. Canberra, which is effective in both regions due to its geography, deeply feels the economic, security, diplomatic and cultural effects of its immediate surroundings. Negatively affected by the increasing influence of China in the region, Australia has the key to protecting its power, again in its geography; the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps the person who best describes Australia’s geographical location and its current geopolitical stance was Indira Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India, with her statement in 1968:

“...Australia looks at the world in two ways; on one side is the Indian Ocean and the thriving monsoon geography of Asia. On the other side lies the Pacific and the rich new world. Australia does not have to choose between these two worlds. It can act as a bridge between...”

Another important statement emphasizing the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Australia was made by Peter Varghese, Australia’s Former High Commissioner to India:4

“Today, it makes more sense to think of Indo-Pacific rather than Asia-Pacific as the centre of Australian security... This new structure of the Indo-Pacific connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, highlighting the important role the marine environment will play in our future strategic and defence planning. Indo-Pacific represents the centre of gravity of Australia’s economic and strategic interests.”

In the period that began after the Second World War, Canberra jointly shaped its foreign policy and security engagement with the United States. Being in the Anglo-Saxon union, Australia signed the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty) with New Zealand and the USA in 1951, expressing its place in the Atlantic system on a legal basis.

In the IV. article of the agreement in question, “Each Party declares that an armed attack on any of the Parties in the Pacific Region is dangerous for its peace and security and will act by its constitutional processes to meet the common danger” is seen as the most fundamental protection item of Australia’s security.5

The fact that Australia is in the Atlantic system causes China to become a target country in the policy launched against the said order. The strongest strategy of Australia, which produces policies against the increasing Chinese threat in the region and especially wants to underline the danger of China by attracting the West to this region, has been using the concept of Indo-Pacific by leaving the Asia-Pacific discourse.

Although the use of Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept date back to ancient times, a report named “Australia in the Asian Century” published by Australia in 2012 was the first official example of the use of “The Indo-Pacific” concept. The term Indo-Pacific, which was also mentioned in the National Security Document published in 2013, pointed out that the concept is not temporary and will be used in Australia’s foreign policy and security.6 The concept of Indo-Pacific is used 58 times in the official defence report of Australia, which was published in 2013 and is frequently referenced.7

Academic Rory Medcalf has undoubtedly made the greatest contribution to Australia’s policymaking for Indo-Pacific and to acting within the Atlantic system to limit China’s growing power. Medcalf has played a leading role in the field, conceptualizing the Indo-Pacific concept with a holistic approach, including its historical dimension. The letter he wrote to the then Foreign Minister of Australia recommending the development of relations with India is known as the first example of Medcalf’s emphasis on the concept of Indo-Pacific. The recommendations written in Medcalf’s letter currently form the core of Canberra’s India policy.8

- Australia should improve relations with India.
- Australia should play an active role in regional formations. In addition, Australia should work with India to make the East Asia Summit an important and useful regional forum.
- Australia should increase its defence exercises with India, and these should be based on real operational scenarios and needs in line with the specific qualifications and experience of the armed forces of both countries.
- Australia should improve its economic relations with India and sign special agreements in the interests of entrepreneurs of both parties.

Medcalf’s proposals and the Australian Government’s primary reason for moving in this direction are to balance China. India is both a historical and geopolitical rival of China. China’s sense of threat from India will enable Beijing to turn its strategic direction towards India, not the Pacific, which includes Australia. In such a case, Australia will ease the pressure on both the economy and security and expand its room for manoeuvre.

In addition, the Indian Ocean is considered as the most strategic ocean in terms of commercial mobility. The Indian Ocean surpasses the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as the world’s busiest trade corridor. Rapid economic growth in South, Northeast and Southeast Asia allows for stronger economic ties with the resource-rich Middle East and Africa. One-third of the world’s goods trade and about two-thirds of global oil shipments currently pass through the Indian Ocean.

For all these reasons, Australia sees India as a key partner to contain China. As a reflection of this situation, it takes care to develop its bilateral relations both with the state in question and with other countries that it believes can cooperate with.

*Figure 2: Indo-Pacific Passage Route*
As noted above, Australia sees India as a key partner to contain China, while also developing bilateral relations with other countries. Since 2014, Canberra has started to network with engagements such as “comprehensive strategic”, “special strategic”, and “advanced strategic” to organize its bilateral relationship with its neighbours. In this context, Australia signed comprehensive agreements with Japan in 2014, Singapore in 2015, France in 2017, Indonesia and Vietnam in 2018, India, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand in 2020, and Malaysia, ASEAN, and Germany in 2021.

In addition to the agreements, the Canberra administration was also involved in two regionally effective groupings. The “Tsunami Core Group” initiated by Japan, the USA, India and Australia, which came together to heal the wounds of the tsunami that occurred in the Indian Ocean in 2004, evolved into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2007.

Disbanding within a year, the group reunited in 2017 and took its current form. As one of the important actors of QUAD, Australia is under the security umbrella of the said formation. Another formation in which Australia participated and which is considered important in the region is known as AUKUS. It was established on 15 September 2021 as a new regional partnership by the United States (USA), the United Kingdom and Australia. This alliance, called “AUKUS”, aims to establish an advanced tripartite security partnership. The partnership, which aims to defend common interests in the Indo-Pacific, was announced as an agreement in which technology, industrial bases and supply chains will be shared.

Australia has suspended its trade agreement with France to participate in the mentioned organization. From this perspective, Canberra sees USA and UK as strategic allies. In a press release published on 16 September 2021, the Australian Prime Minister, Foreign and Defense Ministers made the following statement:

“AUKUS will complement Australia’s network of strategic partnerships with ASEAN friends, Pacific family, Five Eyes partners and QUAD and similar organizations.”

Currently, Australia does not have the strength to counter China’s increasing military power. Although it is an island country, its navy is rather weak when compared to China’s navy. For this reason, it was considered a more logical move by the country’s authorities to enter the sphere of influence of the USA instead of France, which is a distant partner. Moreover, there are important bilateral agreements between the USA and Australia.

Figure 3: Australia’s Security Partners in Indo-Pacific
**US-Australia Partnership**

Announced between the USA and Australia in 2011, United States Force Posture Initiatives (USFPI) aims to improve relations between the two armies, while enabling bilateral exercises to be held in the air and at sea in the Indo-Pacific Region. This initiative, which was launched in 2011, was signed and entered into force in 2014. With this agreement, while the military presence of the USA was established on a legal basis, it was seen that it got closer to the South China Sea and Western Pacific regions.

The Exercise Talisman Sabre, which has been taking place between Australia and the USA since 2005, is another area of military cooperation. The drill, which takes place every two years, was last held in 2021. The exercise in 2019, attended by approximately 34,000 soldiers, focused on the planning, and conduct of medium and high-intensity battles. In the last exercise in 2021, the first test of the MIM-104 Patriot Missile on Australian soil was carried out. More than 17 thousand soldiers from seven countries participated in the exercise. In addition to the launch of the Patriot missile, the exercise included force preparation activities, ground forces manoeuvres, amphibious landings, urban operations, air combat and naval operations. Talisman Saber is the most comprehensive joint training activity between the Australian and US armed forces.

In 2019, the navies of two countries carried out an important exercise near the Scarborough Cliffs, a disputed area in the South China Sea, within the scope of freedom of navigation operation (FONOP), defended by the Washington administration and countries of the region, in the face of China’s unauthorized claims in the seas.

This exercise, carried out by the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Preble (DDG 88) in the US Indo-Pacific Command and the Adelaide-class guided missile frigate HMAS Melbourne (FFG 05) in the Royal Australian Navy, caused a great reaction from China. At the traditional Australian-American Ministerial Consultation Meeting (AUSMIN) held by the US Department of State and Defense with their Australian colleagues in 2017, the security, stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region were emphasized, while the importance of maintaining the freedom of navigation and flight in compliance with the law and adhering to the rules-based order was emphasized. In these consultation meetings, which have been held since 1985, emphasis on Indo-Pacific and navigation stand out since 2017. Undoubtedly, this increases the importance of AUSMIN in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy.

Exercises with the USA strengthen the Australian Navy. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is known as a medium-sized force playing a vital role in the Indo-Pacific region. The RAN Fleet consists of 43 warships and three
decommissioned warships as of March 2022. In recent years, RAN has gained a significant impact capacity with new equipment, training and exercises. Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull wrote in his Defense Document, published in 2016, that it "undertook the largest revitalization, largest modernization and largest investment in the Australian Navy since the Second World War". The Australian Government has spent $50 billion on the Navy to acquire the above-mentioned capabilities.\(^\text{13}\)

**Conclusion**

The recent prominence of Indo-Pacific geography, on one hand, increases the importance of countries in regions such as Australia, on the other hand, it creates ontological security risks with increasing competition. The main objective of Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy is to form an anti-Chinese coalition and establish both bilateral and multilateral alliances with the United States and to stabilize the precarious situation in Indo-Pacific by developing strong partnerships with regional actors.

The most important weakness of Australia in the mentioned target is its economy dependent on China and its weak navy power compared to this country. Especially recently, China’s deepening of cooperation with Pacific countries and signing a security agreement with Solomon Island poses a risk for Canberra, which is only 2000 km away from the region. While the future strategy of Australia is being wondered due to the recent elections, the first practices of the newly elected Labour Party Leader Anthony Albanese are evaluated as a harbinger of being a solid supporter of the USA. Because vote counting was still in progress, Albanese took the oath and attended the QUAD Summit held in Japan. He also announced that he would go to new cooperations with Pacific countries.

In the future, the Indo-Pacific region will be the focus for Australia, as for many countries. Being among the first users of the Indo-Pacific or Free and Open Indo-Pacific discourse, Australia will make a name for itself in international relations and become prominent in regional alliances due to its location on an important geopolitical line.

**AUTHOR**

Mustafa Cem Koyuncu is a Master’s student in International Relations at Karabuk University and works on Indo-Pacific Region, USA-China Rivalry, international security, geopolitics and strategic research. Before starting his education at Karabük University, he completed his undergraduate education at Boğaziçi University. After gaining management experience in the private sector, Koyuncu continues his career at ANKASAM. Koyuncu speaks advanced English.