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Strategic Solidarity – Enhancing Australia's Regional Power¹

Dr Christian E. Rieck

Introduction: A New Model of Burden-Sharing

Germany's role in the Indo-Pacific remains contested domestically: Critics argue that Berlin lacks the military capabilities to influence the regional balance of power, while proponents call for a more visible German presence to deepen the European footprint in the region. Both positions, however, overlook an alternative model of burden-sharing. Germany need not become a Pacific power to contribute meaningfully to Indo-Pacific security. Instead, it can enhance the capabilities of trusted regional partners such as Australia whose security directly underpins the liberal international order.

Three models of burden-sharing in security and defence can be distinguished: (1) *power projection* consists of sending one's own forces abroad to produce or maintain security and stability; (2) *capability enhancement* implies strengthening regional partners and their own contributions to regional and global security; (3) *functional or geographic specialisation* means defending another theatre, thus freeing up allies' capabilities to deploy elsewhere. This paper argues that Germany should combine options (2) and (3) in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing Australia's regional power while focusing on NATO's eastern flank as the more urgent security challenge for Germany and Europe.

This paper conceptualizes this approach as *strategic solidarity*: It differs from classical alliance solidarity because it is not measured by the direct projection of military power but by the contribution a state makes to strengthening the collective strategic position of its partners. As described here, strategic solidarity would build on the shared discursive foundations of international order (Homolar/Turner 2024) and go beyond durable strategic alignment, military cooperation and common security interests (Shim 2006) to include a conscious state-induced and industry-led leveraging of military technological and defence industrial cooperation.

The reason for this partnership model is that Germany's real strength lies not in projecting military power over great distances, but rather in projecting technological capacity, industrial expertise,

¹ Parts of this contribution form the basis for a longer article by the author titled "A Partnership for a New Era", which he co-wrote with Sabina Wölkner to be published in KAS International Reports 3/2026.

institutionalized partnerships, and long-term strategic commitment. Here, strategic solidarity is more than solidarity between like-minded states (Rieck 2022), it is the deliberate combination of complementary capabilities to strengthen the collective strategic position of the Western alliance. Germany should pursue it as a grand strategy in which a state's own security is pursued primarily by deliberately increasing the political, military, economic, and institutional capabilities of allies and partners.

Why Australia? Five Reasons Why

Stronger together: German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul visited Canberra during his first year in office. A free trade agreement with the European Union was concluded, and both sides reaffirmed their commitment to continued participation in joint military exercises. The partnership is deepening across a broad range of areas, demonstrating the extent of the common ground shared by Canberra and Berlin. While the relationship has traditionally been framed as a partnership of values between two liberal democracies, the deteriorating geopolitical environment in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific is transforming it into a partnership based increasingly on shared interests—one that already extends beyond diplomacy and foreign trade to encompass elements of a security partnership (AA 2021).

Five reasons stand out for a deeper German-Australian partnership:

- First, both countries can contribute to a more effective diplomatic division of labour. As middle powers committed to multilateralism, Germany and Australia have a shared interest in defending what remains of the rules-based international order.
- Second, closer security cooperation would contribute to military burden-sharing. Balancing China's growing great-power ambitions helps preserve regional stability and security in the Indo-Pacific and is therefore also in Europe's strategic interest.
- Third, both countries share important economic interests. They have a common stake in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific, particularly the principle of freedom of navigation, upon which their prosperity as trading nations depends.
- Fourth, development cooperation offers another field for strategic collaboration. Combating climate change—and thus demonstrating active solidarity with the Pacific Island states—requires the production and protection of global public goods in the fields of climate and environmental policy.
- Fifth, Germany and Australia enjoy an exceptionally broad alignment of both values and interests. This high degree of convergence provides a strong foundation and, in itself, constitutes a compelling reason for deepening bilateral cooperation.

Australia combines a liberal internationalist outlook with robust military capabilities. Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and particularly through Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles, the Australian government has invested heavily in the instruments of an assertive middle-power strategy similar to that recently advocated by Mark Carney in Canada: Like-minded middle powers, the argument goes, must cooperate more closely not only diplomatically but also in matters of security—whether or not the United States remains fully engaged (Carney 2026). Australia's increasingly active strategic posture and expanding presence across the Indo-Pacific therefore present opportunities for Europe as well. Berlin and Brussels should actively support Canberra's growing regional engagement in the interest of strengthening the political West, which can no longer define itself solely in Euro-Atlantic terms but must increasingly embrace the Indo-Pacific as an integral part of its strategic outlook.

Australia's Strategic Transformation: The Geopolitization of Australian Security and Defence

Foreign and security policy debates in Canberra are now shaped by the widespread perception that Australia's strategic environment has undergone a fundamental transformation (Wong 2025). China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific extend well beyond the "Nine-Dash Line" in the South China Sea. They encompass the expansion of security partnerships in the South Pacific, the development of a blue-water navy capable of projecting power on a global scale, the acquisition of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities aimed at extra-regional powers such as the United States, and, not least, the growing threat hanging over Taiwan (Kirchberger 2015: 21-56).

At the same time, doubts have emerged regarding the long-term reliability of the United States as an ally (Green 2019). Although the United States remains Australia's indispensable security guarantor—as reflected in the ANZUS Treaty, the close intelligence cooperation within the Five Eyes partnership, and the joint AUKUS programme for the development of strategic submarines—political polarisation in Washington, increasingly erratic leadership, and the possibility of abrupt shifts in American strategic priorities have fuelled concerns that Australia may, in a future crisis, be forced to rely more heavily on its own military capabilities (Lowy Institute Poll 2026). The appearance of U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the most recent Shangri-La Dialogue, where he called upon regional partners to assume a greater share of the security burden, further reinforced this perception (Marston 2026).

Against this backdrop, AUKUS—the trilateral security agreement concluded under Prime Minister Scott Morrison in 2021 between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom—has become the defining symbol of Canberra's determined and bipartisan strategy of deepening its security partnerships, even if the agreement remains unique in terms of its technological ambition. Under Pillar I, the three partners are jointly developing a new class of nuclear-powered attack submarines that will dramatically extend the operational reach of Australia's submarine fleet, enabling prolonged deployments at greater distances while remaining undetected. In parallel, Pillar II encompasses a wide range of advanced technology projects, including undersea capabilities, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic systems, and electronic warfare. The first of these initiatives focuses on autonomous underwater vehicles designed to improve maritime domain awareness (Groffman 2026). Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who served as Australia's ambassador to Washington until March 2026, successfully defended the strategic rationale behind AUKUS even in the face of scepticism from the Trump administration (Kelly 2025).

Yet AUKUS represents only one dimension of Australia's evolving strategic posture. Canberra's growing regional engagement is equally evident in its increasingly close security cooperation with the Pacific Island Countries, which in some cases has acquired quasi-integrative characteristics. This has been accompanied by initiatives to strengthen police cooperation in the Pacific, particularly with Micronesia; by a renewed diplomatic and security focus on Southeast Asia, including ASEAN; by deeper strategic partnerships with Japan and South Korea; and by efforts to balance China's growing influence both through joint military exercises with regional partners such as the Philippines in the South China Sea and through stronger alliances with extra-regional partners under frameworks such as AUKUS and the Quad (Medcalf 2014, Rodan 2025).

Since 2025, Canberra has placed particular emphasis on strengthening relations with the major regional powers of the Indo-Pacific. In February 2026, Australia concluded a landmark security treaty with Indonesia, enabling both countries, where necessary, to undertake joint military action (Albanese/Wong 2026). Long-term procurement decisions such as the acquisition of eleven *Mogami*-class frigates from Japan will significantly enhance interoperability with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces while

facilitating technology transfer from Japan (Marles/Conroy 2026). By contrast, Australia has yet to develop a relationship with India that extends meaningfully beyond cooperation within the Quad framework. Australia's deepest level of military integration has recently been achieved with Papua New Guinea. Under an agreement concluded in October 2025, Papua New Guinea may contribute up to 10,000 personnel to the Australian Defence Force, while Australia has been granted access to Papua New Guinean military infrastructure under a mutual security assistance arrangement (Lam/Ng 2025). Taken together, these developments illustrate that Australia has embraced a strategy of forward defence far more decisively than in the past: Rather than waiting for threats to approach its own coastline, Canberra seeks to project military power into Southeast Asia and the South Pacific at an early stage in order to deter—and, if necessary, defeat—Chinese ambitions well before they reach Australia's immediate neighbourhood.

Maritime security naturally occupies the centre of this strategy. As an island nation whose prosperity depends on international trade, Australia (alone or together with regional like-minded states) places paramount importance on protecting sea lines of communication, ensuring freedom of navigation throughout the Indo-Pacific, and protecting the maritime infrastructure upon which the overwhelming majority of its foreign trade depends. This strategic background explains the political consensus behind AUKUS (Lowy Institute Poll 2023), despite the considerable fiscal pressures it imposes on Australia's defence budget. At the same time, Pillar II offers promising opportunities for defence-industrial cooperation with additional partners, including Germany and Japan which already participated in an AUKUS Pillar II military exercise in 2025.

Operationalizing Strategic Solidarity: The Path to Joint Cooperation

Given that Australia's evolving security and defence policy serves important German interests, Berlin should adopt a more partnership-oriented approach to its own security and defence policy toolkit: This requires not only expanding defence exports but also relocating selected production capacities abroad and investing more systematically in joint research and development. As a high-tech nation, Australia possesses an advanced research infrastructure, including in the defence sector, creating numerous opportunities for industrial and technological cooperation. From the perspective of German industry, the opportunities for cooperation with Australia clearly outweigh potential competitive concerns. This distinguishes Australia from countries such as Japan and South Korea, whose defence industries are becoming increasingly formidable competitors on global arms markets: Hyundai Rotem has sold its K2 Black Panther to Poland in 2025, outbidding the German Leopard 2, while Hanwha is bidding against TKMS for new Canadian submarines and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries won the bid against TKMS for the new Australian frigates.

Germany could make a significant contribution to strengthening Australia's defence capabilities through targeted *defence-industrial cooperation*. Priority should be given to joint projects in naval systems, air and missile defence, autonomous systems, and the enhancement of interoperability with European military equipment. German expertise in sensors, radar technology, submarine components, long-range precision weapons such as TAURUS, and air defence systems such as IRIS-T could complement Australian capabilities without undermining interoperability with U.S. forces.

Additional opportunities exist in ammunition production, maintenance, and the development of resilient defence supply chains, thereby enhancing Australia's long-term operational readiness. Successful precedents already exist. Rheinmetall Defence Australia manufactures the Boxer armoured fighting vehicle in Queensland for the Australian Defence Force, demonstrating that close industrial cooperation is both politically feasible and commercially viable. German *drone start-ups*

could likewise benefit from collaboration with Australian companies, particularly if both governments actively promoted the establishment of joint ventures. One promising instrument would be a bilateral innovation fund through which German and Australian firms could jointly compete for research and development grants.

Beyond the defence sector itself, cooperation in the extraction and processing of critical raw materials also offers considerable potential. Although Australia possesses abundant mineral resources, domestic processing capacity remains comparatively limited despite its growing strategic importance for advanced defence industries.

Military cooperation should not be confined to industry. Germany could expand *training programmes* for Australian personnel (and vice versa) and further strengthen joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific. The regular participation of the Bundeswehr in exercises such as Talisman Sabre (Army) and Pitch Black (Air Force) already provides an important foundation for deeper operational cooperation. German fighter pilots are already being trained at RAAF Base Pearce, the result of a declaration of intent signed in 2024 by the Luftwaffe Air Force Chief Ingo Gerhartz and his counterpart at RAAF Stephen Chappell. Likewise, collaboration in research on artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and cyber defence promises substantial benefits for both countries, as the ongoing war in Ukraine has vividly demonstrated through the growing importance of autonomous drone warfare and information operations.

Industrial partnerships of this kind would necessarily be long-term in nature. Ideally, they could pave the way for German participation in selected AUKUS Pillar II technology programmes. Beyond their practical benefits, such initiatives would strengthen the strategic autonomy of both partners in the Indo-Pacific, deepen mutual trust, and complement Germany's strategic solidarity with Australia through more military deployments to the region. To succeed, however, these efforts would require sustained political leadership. Responsibility cannot rest solely with the Bundeswehr's newly established Government-to-Government (G2G) Office within the procurement office of the Bundeswehr in Koblenz. Rather, the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs would need to provide continuous strategic guidance and political support. Notably, this broader dimension of industrial cooperation has so far received relatively little attention within the AUKUS partnership itself.

Looking Ahead: Germany Can Become a Better Ally

Over the longer term, Germany should aspire to closer participation in the Five Eyes intelligence community, even if such an objective remains beyond reach for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, two initiatives stand out as particularly promising confidence-building measures that would symbolise both countries' long-term commitment to a genuinely strategic partnership—one that goes beyond the security and defence cooperation in the narrow sense outlined above:

- The first would be the establishment of a *Trilateral Development Dialogue* between Australia, New Zealand, and Germany. Such a framework could strengthen the capacities and strategic autonomy of the Pacific Island states while more closely integrating development cooperation with broader security and geopolitical objectives. Crucially, this approach would allow external partners to reinforce the resilience of the Pacific without forcing the island states to become unwilling participants in great-power competition.
- The second proposal is more ambitious: the creation of a *binational university* dedicated to both joint research—including defence-related research—and the education of highly qualified personnel for industry. Beyond its function in science and technology as well as in research and teaching, such an institution would become a lasting symbol of German-Australian friendship.

Conceived within a broader framework of *science diplomacy*, it could also educate future experts on Indo-Pacific affairs while supporting scientific capacity-building across developing countries in the region.

More broadly, the government led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz should seek to redefine Germany's global partnership strategy. Achieving this objective will require closer integration between government and industry, business and academia, as well as between security and development policy. Traditional value-based partnerships with liberal democracies—both within and beyond the G7 and NATO—will remain indispensable. Yet they should increasingly be complemented by more pragmatic partnerships with like-minded states around the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where many of the principal stakeholders in the liberal international order are located (Rieck 2022). Such an approach would pursue two complementary objectives. On the one hand, it would deepen cooperation within the broader political West; on the other, it would strengthen the collective capacity of like-minded states to respond to China's growing international influence. Success will ultimately depend upon the effective combination of soft power and hard power (Rieck 2026).

The Indo-Pacific has also become the subject of an important debate within the Bundeswehr itself. The branches of Germany's armed forces do not view the region through the same strategic lens: The Army in particular regards the Indo-Pacific as a potentially costly distraction from the pressing requirements of deterrence on NATO's eastern flank. The Navy, by contrast, argues that a stronger European presence in the Indo-Pacific is essential if the West is to maintain credible deterrence on a global scale.

These perspectives, however, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect two complementary dimensions of Germany's strategic reorientation. The *Zeitenwende* in Berlin—and, more broadly, in Europe—can be understood both as a contribution to a more effective global division of labour with regional partners such as Australia and also as an expression of strategic solidarity with NATO's Indo-Pacific partners. Especially the concept of maritime security provides a natural bridge between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific theatres, since both regions share a fundamental interest in preserving freedom of navigation and secure maritime trade routes.

Accordingly, German foreign and security policy should regard the Indo-Pacific not as a distant secondary theatre but as strategically connected to the Euro-Atlantic. Germany should therefore continue to expand its presence in the region in close coordination with its European partners, while recognising the limits of European military power. After all, Europe will never possess sufficient capabilities to contain China militarily on its own.

Precisely for that reason, Germany's primary contribution to collective security will continue to lie on NATO's eastern flank. Yet this, too, constitutes an important contribution to strategic solidarity in the Indo-Pacific. By assuming greater responsibility for European defence, Germany enables allies with global capabilities to allocate more resources to Asia. Burden-sharing within the Atlantic Alliance and its NATO Plus partners therefore strengthens deterrence not only in Europe but across the wider Indo-Pacific as well.

Strategic solidarity does not require Germany to become a Pacific power. It requires Germany to become a better ally. Rather than measuring contributions by the number of ships deployed to distant theatres, future burden-sharing should be judged by the extent to which capable partners are enabled to preserve regional balances of power themselves. Germany's greatest strategic contribution to Indo-Pacific security may therefore lie not in projecting power across the globe but in helping trusted allies project resilience where it matters most.

About the Authors

Dr Christian E. Rieck

Associate Professor of War Studies, Universität Potsdam

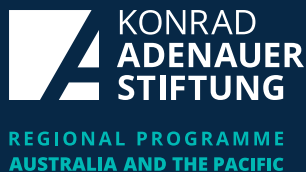
Christian E. Rieck is an Associate Professor of War Studies at the University of Potsdam where he teaches at the intersection of international relations, armed conflict and contemporary history. He is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Global Governance Institute in Brussels. In 2025 he was a Visiting Fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.

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