



EXPLAINER

Courtney Stewart

# ANZUS at 75:

## Strengthening deterrence through Defence Guidelines

### Summary

- At 75, Australia's alliance with the US – under the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) – continues to underpin Australia's security. ANZUS no longer operates as a trilateral alliance; Australia instead maintains separate security alliances with the parties under the treaty.
- A more dangerous and unpredictable strategic environment reinforces the need for the Australia–US alliance and its institutional machinery to evolve in support of credible collective deterrence and defence.
- Australia's deterrence posture encompasses its self-reliant capacity to deter, its contribution to regional collective deterrence and its reliance on US extended deterrence, but how these interact through the alliance remains insufficiently articulated.
- Credible collective deterrence depends not only on combined capability, but on demonstrating the political resolve and practical capacity to plan and act together when required. Other US Indo-Pacific alliances use Defence Guidelines to translate treaty commitments into the practical requirements that signal deterrence credibility.
- Australia and the United States should develop bilateral Defence Guidelines under ANZUS to modernise how the alliance operates and provide a framework connecting political objectives to roles and missions, force posture, capability development, bilateral planning and crisis coordination to address shared security challenges.

### Introduction

ANZUS turns 75 on 1 September. The Australia–US alliance it underpins remains vital to Australia's security and regional peace and stability. But a more dangerous and unpredictable era, in which thresholds against the use of force are being eroded, reinforces the need for the alliance to continue to evolve. As the defence relationship deepens and the demands placed upon it grow, the institutional machinery must evolve with it. Five years ago, the alliance's 70th anniversary prompted debate about whether the alliance could adapt to a changing strategic environment. Two weeks later, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced AUKUS, the most significant deepening of Australia's defence relationship with America since ANZUS was signed. But AUKUS is only one part of an alliance now more deeply integrated than at any point in its history.

At the same time, deterrence has become a more explicit purpose of Australia's alliance activity. The 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS) calls for deeper partnerships that integrate capabilities and operations, with collective deterrence built on demonstrating 'collective capability and resolve'.<sup>1</sup> In August 2026, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby said that growing US investment in the region was coupled with a 'newfound but common sense expectation of much greater effort and contribution by our allies and partners' as well as 'clarity about our priorities,' and 'seriousness about deterrence'.<sup>2</sup> Yet the mechanisms connecting the alliance's political objectives, defence integration and deterrence ambitions have not evolved at

the same pace. At 75, the evolution of the alliance should establish Australia–US Defence Guidelines that provide the institutional framework required for what the alliance is increasingly expected to achieve.

## An alliance transformed

The flexibility of ANZUS has long been one of its strengths. The treaty survived the suspension of US obligations to New Zealand in 1986, effectively transforming a trilateral arrangement into separate Australian alliances with the US and New Zealand. At its core, ANZUS establishes an enduring security commitment but says little about how it should be translated into defence cooperation. It commits the parties to ‘maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack’ and, in the event of an armed attack in the Pacific, each declares that it would ‘act to meet the common danger’ in accordance with its constitutional processes.<sup>3</sup> Yet it doesn’t prescribe what that action should entail or how the parties should organise their respective defence establishments to deliver it.<sup>4</sup> This has given successive governments considerable latitude to adapt the alliance to changing strategic circumstances without renegotiating the treaty.

That flexibility has enabled much of the transformation underway today. Canberra and Washington now operate through a dense network of agreements and initiatives spanning force posture, logistics and sustainment, capability development, industry, intelligence and technology sharing. US forces rotate through Australia in greater numbers and across more domains; infrastructure and prepositioned materiel support their presence and operations. AUKUS is integrating the two countries across submarines, technology, industry and workforce. The 2026 NDS describes these security arrangements as ‘critical to Australia’s national security’ and maintains that the alliance expands Australia’s strategic options beyond what it could achieve alone.

The organic nature of this growth has also produced a more complicated alliance bureaucracy. Much of its architecture has developed incrementally in response to particular strategic, capability or operational requirements. The annual Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) bring together foreign affairs and defence ministers and secretaries to provide political direction, while an extensive network of policy dialogues, force posture mechanisms, AUKUS structures, capability initiatives, intelligence and military channels manage different parts of the relationship. Australia and the US have mechanisms for consultation and cooperation. What they lack is an overarching bilateral defence framework connecting political objectives to roles and missions, force posture, capabilities, planning and operational coordination.

That gap matters more as deterrence becomes an explicit purpose of alliance activity. Credibility depends on an adversary believing that Australian and US forces can act together effectively when required. Exercises, force posture and operational cooperation help demonstrate that capacity, but they also depend on machinery capable of translating political intent and military capability into coordinated action. Without an agreed framework for setting collective defence priorities, deeper cooperation does not necessarily ensure that alliance resources, capabilities and investments are directed where they can generate the greatest strategic effect.

## Three dimensions of Australia’s deterrence

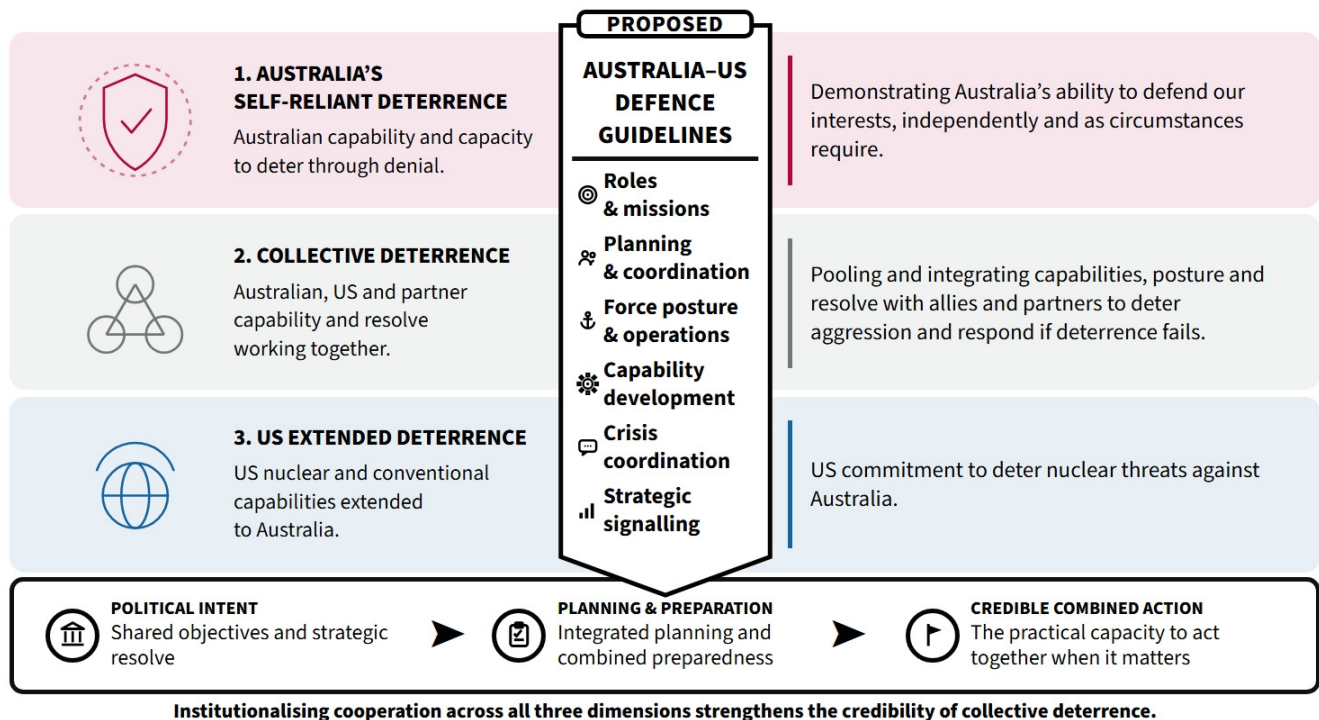
Today, Australia’s deterrence posture operates across three increasingly connected dimensions: its self-reliant capacity to deter, its contribution to regional collective deterrence and its reliance on US extended deterrence.<sup>5</sup> Each serves a different purpose, but they increasingly overlap as Australia becomes more integrated with US and allied forces. How they work together is not always clear.

Australian strategy requires Defence to possess a self-reliant capacity to generate deterrence by denial. The 2026 NDS links increased self-reliance to Australia’s ability to employ and sustain credible military power in a crisis or conflict, including when allied support may be limited. The government requires Defence to demonstrate the capability, capacity and resolve to defend against attempts to project power against Australia, while contributing to collective deterrence with allies and partners.<sup>6</sup> Australia does not expect to deter every regional threat alone. As Chief of the Defence Force Admiral Mark Hammond said in June, Australia does not want ‘to contemplate a strategy of deterrence on our own’.<sup>7</sup>

Collective deterrence brings Australia’s capability together with that of the US and other partners. Australia’s geography, intelligence capabilities, joint facilities, interoperable military forces, logistics and role in supporting US regional force posture all add to the combined military power available to deter regional aggression or conflict and respond if deterrence fails. Institutionalising that cooperation can strengthen its credibility by demonstrating political resolve and the capacity to plan, prepare and act together.

Extended deterrence serves a different purpose. Australia regards US extended nuclear deterrence as the ‘best protection against the increasing risk of nuclear escalation’.<sup>8</sup> Yet ANZUS contains no explicit US nuclear guarantee, and extended deterrence has historically received far less public articulation and institutionalisation in the US–Australia alliance than it has in other US alliances. This trend is changing. In June 2026, Australia and the US publicly described their ‘extended deterrence relationship’ as an important contribution to regional stability and conducted

# Connecting Australia's deterrence architecture



a scenario-based exercise through their annual Strategic Policy Dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

Greater integration is making the boundaries between these dimensions less distinct. In a regional conflict, Australia could simultaneously generate its own deterrent effects, contribute to collective deterrence with other partners and rely on US extended nuclear deterrence. Nuclear coercion against Australia or US strategic signalling could also directly affect Australian decisions, options and operations. This creates an increasingly important conventional–nuclear connection: Australia has a growing interest in how its conventional contribution supports US deterrence, how conventional and nuclear signalling interact, and how the allies would coordinate if they were to face nuclear coercion or escalation. While the Strategic Policy Dialogue is taking important steps towards strengthening this deterrence relationship, it's years behind the maturity of similar forums the US established a decade ago with Japan and South Korea. The key to overcoming this gap more expeditiously is a framework connecting the various engagement strands to the alliance's wider roles, missions, planning and crisis coordination.

## Institutionalisation strengthens deterrence

Greater institutionalisation of the Australia–US alliance could itself strengthen deterrence. Publicly articulated arrangements, supported by bilateral planning, exercises and coordination, can demonstrate both political resolve and the practical ability to act together. Defence Guidelines are already

an established feature of other US Indo-Pacific alliances. Japan, South Korea and the Philippines each have bilateral guidelines with the US that build on longstanding mutual defence treaties while adapting their alliances to changing strategic circumstances. While differing in scope, they provide an overarching framework for translating alliance objectives into practical defence cooperation and coordination.

The 2015 Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation provide the most developed example, establishing an overarching framework for cooperation during peacetime and contingencies.<sup>10</sup> They connect alliance policy to roles and missions, bilateral planning, operational coordination and capability cooperation, enabling the allies to prepare and respond together. A key component is the Alliance Coordination Mechanism, which supports common situational awareness, information sharing and coordinated responses, including flexible deterrent options and actions to de-escalate, while retaining separate national chains of command. The value lies in doing the work beforehand – identifying responsibilities, authorities, logistics and coordination arrangements rather than beginning that process after a crisis has started.

The US–Republic of Korea and US–Philippines Guidelines perform similar functions. The US–ROK Defence Guidelines connect combined defence to operational planning, intelligence sharing, interoperability, exercises and institutionalised extended-deterrence consultation.<sup>11</sup> The 2023 US–Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines explicitly seek to ‘modernize and strengthen’ the alliance by establishing common understandings of roles, missions and capabilities,

strengthening bilateral planning and coordinating capability development to increase combined capacity to resist coercion and deter aggression.<sup>12</sup> In each case, Defence Guidelines translate longstanding treaty commitments into the practical requirements of collective defence and deterrence.

Canberra is already applying similar logic to its alliance with New Zealand under ANZUS. ANZAC 2035 provides a 10-year framework to operationalise the alliance through greater force integration, posture cooperation, combined planning and exercises, explicitly linking these efforts to regional security, crisis response and collective deterrence.<sup>13</sup> Institutionalisation is more than alliance management. It can strengthen the credibility of deterrence by demonstrating that political resolve is backed by the practical ability to employ combined capabilities.

## Defence Guidelines for a deterrence-focused alliance

Australia and the US should use the 75th anniversary of ANZUS to begin developing bilateral Defence Guidelines. They would not replace or reinterpret ANZUS, predetermine Australian participation in future contingencies or add another dialogue to an already crowded architecture. Instead, they would modernise how the treaty is implemented, giving the alliance's growing defence integration greater strategic and operational coherence.

The guidelines should publicly set out what the allies expect their defence relationship to achieve and how they intend to organise around those objectives. Detailed operational and contingency planning can remain classified. They would also provide an opportunity to give greater public clarity to the US extended deterrence commitment to Australia, reinforcing the assurance and signalling that underpin its credibility. For deterrence, the value lies in signalling that political resolve and increasingly integrated military capabilities are backed by practical arrangements for acting together.

The guidelines should also provide greater structural coherence to extensive coordination already underway. They should establish agreed priorities for roles and missions, bilateral planning, force posture, capability development, exercises, logistics and crisis coordination. Drawing on the Japan–US model, an Australia–US Alliance Coordination Mechanism could connect these activities and provide a standing mechanism for coordination from peacetime through crisis and conflict. If political leaders choose to act, the alliance would already have undertaken the planning and preparation required to make that choice credible and executable.

## Conclusion

At 75, the Australia–US alliance remains fundamental to Australia's security, but the machinery supporting it needs to evolve for a more dangerous and unpredictable era. The alliance's extraordinary depth and breadth have developed without an equivalent framework connecting political objectives to growing defence integration. Defence Guidelines could modernise the alliance by providing that framework, giving the alliance greater direction and coherence while strengthening the credibility of collective and US extended deterrence. ANZUS has endured because it gives governments flexibility to adapt as strategic circumstances change. The task now is to use that flexibility to better organise an increasingly integrated alliance for a more contested security environment, with collective deterrence and defence at its core.

## Notes

- 1 Australian Department of Defence, '2026 National Defence Strategy,' 16 April 2026, [online](#).
- 2 Elbridge Colby, Under Secretary of War for Policy, 'Remarks at the Stratbase Institute in Manila, Philippines,' 10 August 2026, [online](#).
- 3 Security Treaty Between Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America [ANZUS], San Francisco, 1 September 1951, [online](#).
- 4 The ANZUS Treaty does establish a Council of Foreign Ministers or their Deputies to consider matters concerning the implementation of the treaty. The ANZUS Council served as the principal forum for trilateral alliance consultation from 1952 until the ANZUS split over New Zealand's prohibition on visits by nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed US vessels rendered the Council inoperative in 1985; AUSMIN, first convened that year, emerged as its bilateral successor between Australia and the US, and has operated for more than four decades.
- 5 The Hon Richard Marles MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, 'Speech to the National Press Club,' 16 April 2026, [online](#).
- 6 Australian Department of Defence, '2026 National Defence Strategy,' 16 April 2026, [online](#).
- 7 Australian Strategic Policy Institute Defence Conference 2026: In conversation with Australia's Defence Chiefs, 25 June 2026, [YouTube](#), [online](#).
- 8 Australian Department of Defence, '2026 National Defence Strategy,' 16 April 2026, [online](#).
- 9 US Department of State, 'Joint Statement on the U.S.-Australia Strategic Policy Dialogue,' Press Statement, 11 June 2026, [online](#).
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,' 27 April 2015, [online](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Diplomatic Blue Book 2016: Chapter 3 Japan's Foreign Policy to Promote National and Worldwide Interests,' updated, [online](#).
- 11 Ministry of National Defense, '2010 Defence White Paper Appendix 16: The Guidelines for U.S.-ROK Defense Cooperation,' 8 October 2010, [online](#).
- 12 'The United States and the Republic of the Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines,' 03 May 2023, [online](#).
- 13 Australian Government, 'Operationalising the Australia-New Zealand Alliance: Anzac 2035 - Closer Defence Relations Statement,' Joint Statement, 17 March 2026, [online](#).

**About the author:** Courtney Stewart is Deputy Director of ASPI's Defence Strategy Program. AI contributed no ideas to this report.

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