

# SECURING AUSTRALIA THROUGH SPACE: AUSTRALIA'S DEFENCE PARTNERSHIPS

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## **About the Securing Australia Through Space Policy Papers Series**

The Australian Centre for Space Governance hosted a workshop in March 2024 titled “Securing Australia Through Space”, where the question was posed: what does Australia need to secure, and how do space technologies help us to do so?

The workshop was attended by over 90 people, with the vast majority of attendees coming from a range of federal government departments and agencies. Experts from academia, government and industry were invited to give presentations and take part in roundtable discussions. This policy paper series is a result of the workshop.

The papers are authored by those who presented, and edited by Sarah O’Connor, Tristan Moss and Cassandra Steer on behalf of the Australian Centre for Space Governance. The opinions expressed in each paper are those of the authors in their individual capacity, and do not represent the views of any of their employers.

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The Australian Centre for Space Governance advocates for Australia’s interests in space in the 21st century and advances the agenda for responsible space governance.

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## Summary

- Australia's recognised strategic capabilities with respect to space are placed squarely within the cyber, electronic and ground-based services, and space domain awareness sectors. However, there is an evolving understanding within Australia of the role of Defence in space as the space domain becomes a zone of tension.
- Whilst Australia has the strategic advantages of geography, location, and size, it does not have a significant budget to support, develop, and grow space services. Australia is therefore dependent upon its key security partners to service its strategic space-focused requirements.
- The current key security-focused partnerships for Australia in the space domain are AUKUS, the Combined Space Operations initiative (CSpO), and the Quad. However, major recognised impediments to collaboration with allies remain, including limits and restrictions on information sharing.
- Overcoming the impediments to collaboration with allies under these security-focused partnerships is imperative for improving Australia's security capabilities in the space domain.

## Policy recommendations

- The Department of Defence should prioritise the development of human capabilities and career pathways for space professionals by leveraging defence partnerships to not only procure space infrastructure but to also build a trained space workforce.
- The Australian Government should produce a comprehensive new Defence Space Strategy considering the evolving understanding of the role of Defence in the space domain.
- The growth of the commercial space industry presents new opportunities for defence procurement, which Defence should harness to improve interoperability domestically and with allies.

Whilst Australia has the strategic advantages of geography, location, and size, it does not have a significant budget to support, develop and grow sovereign space services. Australia is, therefore, dependent upon its key security partners to service its strategic space-focused requirements. The 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* (DSR) recognised the need to leverage the benefits of collaboration with Australia's allies, however the impediments to collaboration under the key security-based partnerships in the space domain present obstacles which must first be overcome to realise these benefits. Moreover, the DSR noted, the 'level of sovereign capability needs' must be considered and 'offset by the cost requirements of such capabilities against opportunities to collaborate with the United States and other partners'.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2022, Australia stood up Defence Space Command within the Royal Australian Air Force (Air Force). At the same time Defence released the *Defence Space Command eManual*, which identified the four distinct space power roles which would be performed by the Australian Defence Force (ADF), namely:

- Space domain awareness;
- Space control;
- Support to the joint force/national security; and
- Space logistics.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, in 2023, the Defence Space Command was moved from the Air Force into the Joint Capabilities Group.

This evolution of the role of space as a key defence domain can be observed in the 2024 *National Defence Strategy*. The *Strategy* confirms that: 'Space and cyber capabilities play a significant role in safeguarding national security, which

means that they are equally as important as the maritime, land and air domains that they support and enable. Space is a critical enabler of military operations, supporting communications, targeting and situational awareness'.<sup>3</sup> To this end, investment in 'space and cyber capabilities that strengthen situational awareness, the ability to project force and decision advantage' is identified as a capability priority.<sup>4</sup>

Australia's recognised strategic capabilities with respect to space are placed squarely within the cyber, electronic and ground-based services and space domain awareness sectors. Whilst Australia formally pledged not to conduct destructive Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite missile testing in 2022, it possesses electronic warfare counterspace capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

## The need to grow a space workforce

The focus in the defence space sector, and in military operations in space, has tended to be predominantly on space infrastructure rather than people. Consequently, in Australia and elsewhere, there has been a preoccupation on acquisition of hardware and procurement of capability as a sign of 'success' as a space power, rather than on the development of people and skillsets. In order to continue to grow expertise and capacity, Australia should focus on developing human capabilities in the space domain, as well as commissioning and acquiring space facilities and services. Security-focused partnerships like AUKUS could be leveraged to further develop such human capabilities.

Similar to the cyber workforce, there is a shortage of people with the requisite skillsets, and competition with the private sector to attract these individuals to a

career within Defence. The need to grow human capability has been endorsed by the DSR, which highlighted that '[a] method should be established for building and sustaining a trained Defence space workforce, including a defined career pathway for space professionals'.<sup>6</sup> Similar endorsements are found in the 2024 *National Defence Strategy* and the *Australian Civil Space Strategy*. However, it remains unclear where such pipelines are being developed.

The growth of the commercial space industry presents new opportunities for defence procurement regarding the space domain. Such opportunities would assist with the capability to acquire resources, support and know-how from a commercial provider. Importantly, this applies to interoperability both domestically and with allies. There is a proposal for a Commercial Space Reserve being stood up in the US to support the US Space Force. Under this model there is an enhanced role for space start-ups and commercial providers beyond the traditional defence primes (noting that Starlink, SpaceX, and RocketLab are all examples of this), in providing support to defence activities.

## International partnerships

While learning from initiatives overseas is useful, given Australia's size and strategic location, defence partnerships are imperative for Australia in the space domain. Australia's main defence partnerships relevant to the space domain are:

- AUKUS;
- The Combined Space Operations initiative (CSpO); and
- The Quad.

However, there are major recognised impediments to collaboration with allies, not least limits and restrictions on information sharing, such as the over-classification of information. Thus, while 'interoperability, intelligence sharing and industrial cooperation' are seen as critical to enhancing national security, these goals may not always be straightforward to achieve, even between close allies.<sup>7</sup>

This could change with the signing of the *Technology Safeguards Agreement (TSA)* on 26 October 2023. The TSA – which entered into force on 23 July 2024 – is a treaty between the United States (US) and Australia that will enable US space technology to be launched from Australia.<sup>8</sup> There has also been an interim final rule amendment to the US International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) to provide an ITAR § 126.7 export licensing exemption to Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) published on 20 August 2024.<sup>9</sup> The *Defence Trade Control Amendment Act 2024 (Cth)* was enacted in part to meet the requirements for granting this exemption, which were that Australia must be found to have 'a system of export controls comparable to those of the United States' and has 'implemented a comparable exemption from its exports controls for the United States'.<sup>10</sup>

The ITAR amendment seeks to 'facilitate defense trade and cooperation among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States' by:<sup>11</sup>

- A new exemption pursuant to s 38(l) of the *Arms Export Control Act (US)*;
- '[A]dding an expedited licensing process for certain defense article and defense service exports to Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada';

- '[A]dding a list of defense articles and defense services excluded from eligibility for transfer under the new exemption for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States'; and
- '[A]dding to the scope of the exemption for intra-company, intra-organization, and intra-governmental transfers to allow for the transfer of classified defense articles to certain dual nationals who are authorized users within the United Kingdom and Australia'.

The new exemption thereby removes licensing requirements regarding 'most military goods and technology items exported, re-exported or transferred (in-country) to or within the three AUKUS partners'.<sup>12</sup>

## AUKUS

The move to facilitate technology export between Australia, the UK and the US was necessary following the formation of the AUKUS trilateral security partnership between Australia, the US, and the UK in September 2021. AUKUS consists of two pillars. Pillar I focuses on supporting Australia in acquiring a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Pillar II concerns cooperation and development in eight advanced military capability areas. The original four advanced capabilities identified under Pillar II are:

- Cyber capabilities;
- Artificial intelligence;
- Quantum technologies; and
- Undersea capabilities.

A further four advanced capabilities, namely hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare, innovation,

and information sharing, were announced in April 2022.<sup>13</sup> Whilst space technology is thereby not explicitly included as an advanced capability, there is at least one example of a joint AUKUS space capability, namely the Deep Space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) program, announced in 2023 as a commitment under AUKUS.<sup>14</sup> There may also be further AUKUS projects regarding space technologies that remain classified.

DARC is a ground system which tracks objects in geosynchronous orbit and will be jointly operated by the AUKUS partners. In a joint statement, the AUKUS defence ministers said that the program 'will provide 24-hour continuous, all-weather global coverage to detect, track, and identify objects in deep space and increase space domain awareness'.<sup>15</sup> They stated that '[t]his capability will contribute to the security, safety, and responsible use of space'.<sup>16</sup>

There will be three DARC radar sites in total, with one in each AUKUS member country. The first radar site will be near Exmouth in Western Australia. There are already existing space-surveillance systems at Exmouth, notably the C-Band Space Surveillance Radar System which is a joint initiative between Australia and the US.<sup>17</sup> The Australian DARC site will be operational by 2026, with the remaining two sites in the US and the UK to be operational by 2030.

The DARC program intends to leverage the geography of the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, exemplifying the importance of strategic co-operation with respect to the space domain. The geographical spacing between the countries provides 'a much better network than what any one country can do by itself'.<sup>18</sup>

It also promotes resilient space architecture. For Australia, DARC strengthens both Australian space domain awareness capabilities, and our ability to share intelligence with defence partners under the CSpO initiative.<sup>19</sup> DARC expands Australia's detection and monitoring capabilities regarding activities in geosynchronous orbit, which is essential to protecting satellites from counterspace attacks.<sup>20</sup> The capabilities developed under DARC may also assist in Defence Project 9358, which 'explore[s] options for the acquisition of a ground-based Space Electronic Warfare capability'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, DARC could 'play an important role in 'space control' missions'.<sup>22</sup> According to the 2022 Space Power eManual, '[s]pace control involves offensive and defensive operations to ensure freedom of action in space by defeating efforts to interfere with or attack Australian or allied space systems and, when directed, deny space services to a competitor'.<sup>23</sup>

There are limits to what AUKUS can achieve on its own, and there are some countries eager to become partners to this new alliance. In a joint leader statement last year, the AUKUS partners stated that they 'will seek opportunities to engage allies and close partners'.<sup>24</sup> There has recently been some speculation regarding whether the AUKUS partnership will be expanded specifically with respect to Pillar II technologies.

Canada and New Zealand are obvious candidates in light of the existing 'Five Eyes' intelligence sharing partnership. Australia and New Zealand held meetings regarding AUKUS in January and February of this year.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the visit by the Prime Minister of Japan to Washington in April of this year heightened predictions that Japan may be the first new addition to AUKUS.<sup>26</sup> Japan was additionally an

observer to Exercise Autonomous Warrior under Pillar II in October 2024.<sup>27</sup> South Korea is a further prospective partner. However, whether and when any of these countries will join cooperation regarding Pillar II remains to be seen.

## The Quad

Another key multilateral partnership for defence space cooperation is the Quad, a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the US. The Quad is committed to supporting 'a free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient'.<sup>28</sup> Space is explicitly recognised as one of the Quad's areas of cooperation.

Each Quad member country has unique space capabilities. At the 2023 Quad Leaders' Summit, the specific areas of focus regarding space were identified as:

- Extreme precipitation events;
- Commercial space cooperation; and
- Space situational awareness.<sup>29</sup>

The commercial space cooperation aims at 'further grow[ing] the Quad's 'respective space sectors to support good-paying jobs in the Quad, enhance the resilience of our space supply chains, and lead the region in setting responsible standards'.<sup>30</sup> The collaboration regarding space situational awareness includes 'increased international collaboration on standards for data sharing and global norms for sharing of satellite operator data and best practices'.<sup>31</sup>

Further areas of focus regarding space were identified at the 2022 Quad Leaders' Summit, including strengthening 'commitments to the free, full, and open sharing of space-based civil Earth observation data' and the US coordinating

with Quad partners regarding 'its cooperative civil Earth observation programs'.<sup>32</sup>

Yet there remain recognised limitations of the Quad diplomatic partnership, including the efficacy of minilaterals in achieving security cooperation, the differing national interests of Quad members, and political sensitivities and geostrategic concerns.

## Combined Space Operations

The Combined Space Operations initiative (CSpO) was founded in 2014 by Australia, the US, the UK and Canada, as a multinational partnership that aims to '[g]enerate and improve cooperation, coordination, and interoperability opportunities to sustain freedom of action in space, optimize resources, enhance mission assurance and resilience, and prevent conflict'.<sup>33</sup> New Zealand, Germany, France Italy, Japan, and Norway have since joined the CSpO.<sup>34</sup>

In February 2022, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, the UK and the US released the CSpO Vision 2031 joint statement, which outlines the ten-year vision of the CSpO. According to the Vision statement, the objectives of the CSpO, which 'guide' the CSpO Participants' 'national and collective actions', are:<sup>35</sup>

- Prevent conflicts;
- Unity of effort;
- Space mission assurance; and
- Defence protection.

Given the different capabilities possessed by various allies, Australia should deepen broad defence alliances with respect to the space domain to improve Australia's security capabilities in space. The CSpO provides an expanded venue for Australian

engagement with space security issues and countries possessing a broad range of space capabilities. The CSpO multinational partnership thereby serves as an important platform for Australia to deepen broad defence alliances.

## Conclusions

The space domain is of international concern, so Australia should develop its understanding of the space environment as a zone of tension cooperatively with allies and other states. In the face of escalating space tensions, Australia needs to shape its response to those threats and challenges in co-operation with its allies and partners, including the space industry. In light of this evolving understanding of the role of Defence in the space domain, there is a compelling need for a new Australian Defence Space Strategy. There are also new opportunities for defence procurement regarding the space domain given the growth of the commercial space industry. There is an increased understanding of the role commercial operators are now playing in this dual-use environment and the potential need to leverage commercial capability in support of resilient space architecture.

Further, it is absolutely paramount to ensure investment in creating and supporting a skilled workforce for the space industry and adjacent professions. This would include trade, tertiary education and training, as well as clear career pathways in defence, academia and industry. Defence partnerships may thereby be leveraged not only to develop space infrastructure, but also to build and sustain a trained space workforce in Australia.



## Notes

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