Remembering Singapore

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A global political and diplomatic crisis has ensued in the aftermath of the 2025 Munich Security Conference, which saw American Vice-President J.D. Vance give an iconoclastic speech to a stunned audience about the threat from within for Europe. President Donald Trump followed up on these remarks in his immediate assault on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a 'dictator', launching immediate negotiations with Russia regarding an end to the Ukraine War, sidelining Europe in the process. It was the political equivalent of the old boxing euphemism – 'left, right, goodnight'. A stunned Europe is still picking up the pieces and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

There is, however, a cautionary tale here for other allies of the United States. A trade war with Canada, combined with threats of annexation, has put the Canadians on high alert, as have the Danes, who have been subjected to threats aplenty regarding control of Greenland. American allies, the Europeans chief amongst them, are realising that they are participating in an increasingly violent and erratic rodeo with no clear off-ramp that doesn't result in some mutilation. They are realising, consciously or not, that their foreign policy has always been America-first. The vacuum left in the wake of this realisation has been equal parts vexing and exasperating. For Australia, the warning is clear – it must place its own geopolitical considerations first, for its history highlights the dangers of relying on foreign power patronage alone.

Australia has silently been making moves for a harsher and more isolated world ahead. Canberra has refined its declarations of fealty, this time in the language of deterrence, committing $500 million to propping up the American submarine industry — a mere down-payment on AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States), the trilateral framework tying Australia, Britain, and the United States into a decades-long maritime containment strategy against China in the Indo-Pacific. Brokered under the Biden administration but designed to outlast presidencies, the project is projected to cost up to $228 billion, a generational investment in the persistence of a fading Pax Americana.

At its core, AUKUS envisions a co-produced, nuclear-powered submarine fleet, a collaboration between Britain and Australia that will only begin delivering vessels in the early 2040s. In the meantime, Australia will import deterrence directly from Washington, purchasing a fleet of American-built submarines while investing billions in naval infrastructure. This includes expanding a base near Perth to serve as a forward operating hub for US and UK forces, granting them unobstructed access to the Indian Ocean. AUKUS is not merely an arms deal—it is a strategic commitment, an endorsement of American hegemony in the Pacific, paid for with Australian billions and decades of geopolitical obligation. It functions as a tributary payment – one that Australia hopes will help shield it from American wrath.

But what if Australia bet on the wrong horse? With the ascendancy of a vengeful Trump in the White House, Canberra is considering a period of 'triage' where the risks of alienating its biggest economic partner in China must be balanced against the risks of attaching itself as a force-multiplier of America in the Pacific. The balance of assessment within Canberra is showing signs of shifting, as while Australia for now is still safer within the alliance, there is newfound hesitation that antagonising China simply wouldn't be in Australia's core security interests, for just as AUKUS raises our status as a military player in the region, so too does it raise our target profile — the combined effect of basing US forces alongside having our own nuclear-powered submarines with the ability to hit mainland Chinese targets.

In this, Australia is haunted by its wartime past and by the spectre of abandonment, a trauma that reconfigures itself with each passing decade but never fully dissipates. The Fall of Singapore in 1942—once a cornerstone of British imperial defence—collapsed not under enemy fire, but under the weight of imperial indifference. Australia, conditioned to see itself as an extension of British power, found itself discarded overnight, its security no longer a matter of strategic necessity but of colonial expendability. The shock was existential: the myth of eternal British protection evaporated, leaving behind a nation suddenly aware of its own isolation, its own vulnerability.

That memory lingers, resurfacing in the anxious search for new patrons, new guarantees of security. First, it was the United States, its primacy unquestioned in the postwar years, underwriting Australia's defence through ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty) and the forward projection of American power. Now, in an era of shifting geopolitical tides, the same compulsion re-emerges: AUKUS, regional basing agreements, and multibillion-dollar defence commitments all trace back to the same fear—that without an empire to anchor it, Australia is simply too exposed, too alone. The Fall of Singapore was not just a military failure—it was a rupture in Australia's strategic psyche, one that still demands appeasement, still dictates alliances, still binds the country to distant powers in the hope that history will not repeat itself. But could it? The future of Ukraine will provide answers to this question.

These are the manifold considerations being debated in Canberra and in Australia's strategic community at this fraught moment in world history. Australia must once again be reminded that it holds its own unique geopolitical and sovereign considerations, for as former Prime Minister Paul Keating addressed this anxiety at an ANZAC Day ceremony in Port Moresby in 1992, "in the hour of crisis, after the fall of Singapore, Australia looked to the United States – free [...] of any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom... We know that Australia can go and Britain still hold on... We are therefore determined that Australia shall not go". Wise words, and ones which should be remembered, for if war is the continuation of politics by other means, then foreign policy is the politics whose failure means conflict.