


Chapter 14

From “Outsider” to “Bridge”: National Identity and Australia's Strategic Evolution in the South China Sea Disputes (1996–2013)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Australia's strategic posture toward the South China Sea disputes (1996-2013), arguing that national identity shifts fundamentally shaped foreign policy. Employing constructivist, realist, and liberal frameworks, the research traces Australia's identity transformation through three phases: Keating's “part of Asia” aspiration, Howard's “in Asia but not of Asia” realism, and Rudd-Gillard's “bridge between East and West” synthesis. This evolution drove strategic shifts from engagement to US bandwagoning, culminating in sophisticated hedging through diversified partnerships. The Australia-Vietnam security relationship demonstrates how the “bridge” identity enabled complex middle-power diplomacy—maintaining

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economic ties with China while strengthening regional security cooperation. This research proves national identity constitutes an active variable, not rhetorical backdrop, in maritime strategy formulation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific region has undergone profound transformation in the post-Cold War era, characterized predominantly by China's rapid ascent and the consequent intensification of strategic competition among major powers (Tran & Nguyen, 2024). Positioned at the nexus of these shifting dynamics, Australia confronts an increasingly complex and contested regional environment that challenges its traditional strategic calculus. The South China Sea (SCS), a critical maritime corridor and flashpoint for territorial disputes, has emerged as the principal theater where these geopolitical tensions manifest most acutely. For Australia—a middle power with substantial economic ties to Asia and an enduring security alliance with the United States—the SCS disputes represent not merely a distant maritime controversy but a fundamental test of its foreign policy autonomy, national security imperatives, and regional identity (White, 2011).

This research focuses specifically on the critical period from 1996 to 2013, a transformative era that witnessed fundamental shifts in Australia's strategic orientation toward the SCS and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This seventeen-year timeframe encompasses three distinct political administrations—the Howard Coalition government (1996-2007), the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments (2007-2013), and the initial months of the Abbott Coalition government—each of which articulated markedly different conceptions of Australia's national identity and regional role. The period begins with the election of the Howard government in 1996, which marked a decisive departure from the Keating Labor government's "part of Asia" vision, and concludes in 2013 with the release of the Defence White Paper, by which point Australia had firmly established its "bridge" identity and sophisticated hedging strategy.

The selection of this timeframe reflects several critical inflection points in Australia's strategic evolution. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis tested the new Howard government's regional engagement framework. The September 11, 2001 attacks fundamentally reshaped Australia's security priorities, deepening alignment with the United States. The 2007 election brought Labor back to power under Kevin Rudd, initiating a shift toward creative middle-power diplomacy. China's increasingly assertive posture in the SCS, particularly following its formal submission of the nine-dash line to the United Nations in 2009, created urgent pressures for Australia to refine its strategic approach. By 2012-2013, with the release of the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper and the Defence White Paper, Australia

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