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Changes in Australia's Perception of External Threats — Analysis Based on Lowy Institute Poll Reports from 2005-2023

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Abstract

Based on poll data from the Lowy Institute (2005–2023), this article employs descriptive statistics and trend analysis to systematically examine the evolution and typological characteristics of Australia's perception of external threats. The findings reveal a significant decline in Australia's overall sense of security over the past 18 years: the proportion of respondents who considered Australia "safe" or "very safe" dropped from 91% in 2005 to 63% in 2023. The country's threat perception has undergone a profound transition from a "risk society" mindset to one of "strategic anxiety." In the traditional security domain, focus has shifted from international terrorism to great-power geopolitical competition, accompanied by heightened concerns over land and maritime conflicts. In the non-traditional domain, sensitivities to climate change and cyber threats have intensified. Perceptions of China as a threat have reversed markedly: the share viewing China as a "security threat" surged from 15% in 2015 to 52% in 2023, while those considering China "likely" or "very likely" to become a military threat rose from 39% to 75% over the same period. The study attributes this evolution to historical psychology, economic interdependence, and alliance politics, concluding that Australia has formed a multilayered threat perception consensus that will continue to shape its national security strategy and foreign policy.

Keywords: Australia; Threat Perception; Lowy Institute; Security Strategy; Poll Analysis

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1. Introduction

On April 24, 2023, the Australian Department of Defence released a new version of the Defence Strategic Review. The report assessed Australia's strategic environment, future defence strategy, and the sufficiency of the Australian Defence Force's capabilities. Regarding changes in Australia's external strategic environment, the report stated that "major power competition has the potential to threaten Australian interests and even lead to conflict," followed by a negative characterization of China's military and strategic intentions. Understanding how Australia perceives external threats is therefore essential for comprehending the trajectory of its security strategy. Threat perception theory provides a useful analytical lens, as it explains how states interpret the capabilities and intentions of others based on subjective cognitive processes, which in turn shape foreign policy choices. Applying this theoretical perspective to Australia allows for a systematic examination of how its policymakers and public assess external dangers and prioritize security responses.

The Lowy Institute, as an independent think tank, conducts annual polling on Australian foreign policy and national security. Its surveys enjoy high recognition in policy advocacy and have

achieved significant influence in research areas such as East Asian studies, international security, Pacific Island affairs, and public opinion polling. The poll reports cover Australians' overall sense of security, attitudes toward specific countries and regions, and views on major international events. These data provide a valuable empirical foundation for analyzing the evolution of Australia's threat perception over time.

This study addresses three research questions:

What types of external threats does Australia perceive?

How have these threat perceptions changed over time?

What factors explain Australia's overall threat perception and its specific perception of China as a threat?

To answer these questions, the study draws on Lowy Institute poll reports from 2005 to 2023, using "threat" as a keyword to retrieve relevant survey items. Methodologically, the study applies descriptive statistics and trend analysis to trace changes in threat perception across traditional and non-traditional security domains.

To operationalize threat perception theory, the study adopts David Singer's formulation: threat = estimated capability × estimated intention. This framework is applied to the poll data through several indicators. For "capability," the study uses survey questions asking respondents about the perceived military power of other countries and their potential to inflict harm on Australia. For "intention," the study draws on questions regarding whether respondents view specific countries—particularly China—as acting cooperatively or confrontationally toward Australia. Additional indicators capture the perceived importance of various threats (e.g., climate change, cyberattacks, regional conflicts), measured through questions that ask respondents to rank threats to Australia's vital interests. These empirical measures allow the study to systematically map how Australians assess both the capabilities and intentions of potential threat sources, and how these assessments have shifted over nearly two decades.

2. Theoretical Discussion of Threat Perception

“However great the methodological difficulties, using psychology to study politics is an indispensable and irreplaceable method.... In a word, the psychological elements in political behavior are obvious and play a key role (Sausser, 1992).” Scholar Zhang Qingmin pointed out that using psychological theories and methods to explain human political behavior and analyze national foreign policy and international political phenomena is a current hotspot in international political research (Zhang, 2008). Cognitive psychology refers to research that uses human cognitive processes such as perception, understanding, imagination, and thinking to explain psychological phenomena, collectively referred to as cognitive theory. Cognitive theory mainly studies human cognitive behavior, that is, various psychological activities carried out in the process of knowing things, mainly including perception, attention, memory, language, thinking, etc (Jointly compiled by twelve key normal universities, 2002). This paper applies cognitive theory, specifically theories related to threat perception; therefore, this will be elaborated upon.

“Threat” mainly has two meanings: one is an active means of exerting influence, an action taken to affect the other party's choices; the other is a passive expectation of impending damage, the perceived or imagined result of the other party's future activities. This paper deals with the second type of threat, a negative, passive feeling, stemming from past experiences, intrinsic value orientations, and different interest needs, a prediction of the damage one is about to suffer (Baldwin, 1971). This threat perception may be factual, based on inferences from clear crisis signals related to the other party's intentions, or potential, based on judgment of a certain environment or merely consideration of the opponent's capabilities.

In international politics, David Singer believed that “threat = estimated capability × estimated intention (Singer, 1958).” Here, threat is the cognitive result produced by judging the other party's capability and intention. Klaus Knorr and Raymond Cohen viewed threat perception as a cognitive construction process, considering threat perception as a subjective psychological inference about

an objective situation, a selective perception and interpretation of threat signals, whose core is the combination of subjective cognition and logical inference (Cohen, 1978; Knorr, 1976).

Regarding the generation mechanism of threat perception, realist theory and the realistic conflict theory in psychology believe that power asymmetry automatically triggers the perception of threat and intergroup threat. Constructivist theory and social identity theory in psychology assert that identity demarcates the boundaries of in-groups and out-groups and lays the foundation for distinguishing friend from foe, and thus greatly influences the perception of threat (Wendt, 1999).

Before proceeding to empirical analysis, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual relationship between "threat perception" and "sense of security," as these two terms are closely related but not identical. In cognitive psychology and international relations theory, threat perception refers to an individual's or a state's subjective assessment of potential harm posed by an external actor or event, typically involving judgments about the capability and intention of the threat source. It is a forward-looking evaluation focused on specific sources of danger. Sense of security, by contrast, refers to a broader psychological state of feeling safe from danger, threat, or injury. It represents an overall assessment of one's environment rather than a judgment about any particular threat source.

In this study, overall sense of security is treated as a reverse indicator of external threat perception. The logic underlying this operationalization is straightforward: when individuals perceive a high level of threat from the external environment, their overall sense of security decreases; conversely, when threat perceptions are low, their sense of security increases. While sense of security may also be influenced by domestic factors such as economic conditions or social stability, in the context of the Lowy Institute's polling questions—which specifically ask about Australia's safety in relation to external threats—the inverse relationship is particularly strong. Therefore, declines in the proportion of respondents feeling "safe" or "very safe" can be interpreted as reflecting heightened perceptions of external threats, providing a macro-level indicator of threat perception trends.

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Sources

The research uses the Lowy Institute's poll reports from 2005-2023 as data sources. The Lowy Institute, as an independent think tank, primarily researches Australian foreign policy and national security-related content. It has high industry recognition in public relations and policy advocacy and has achieved certain results in business areas such as East Asian studies, international security, Pacific Island studies, West Asian studies, international economic research, diplomacy, and polling. Its survey report content has objective value for analyzing Australia's threat perception. This study used "threat" as a keyword for retrieval and analyzed relevant data.

3.2 Analytical Framework and Causal Model

While the original analysis provides detailed description of trends in Australia's threat perception, it does not establish a clear model to explain the causal relationships among the identified factors. To address this limitation, this study proposes a conceptual framework that links macro-level drivers to threat perception outcomes. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework posits that Australia's threat perception is shaped by factors operating at four levels: (1) the international system level (e.g., changes in global order, great power competition); (2) the regional level (e.g., Asia-Pacific security architecture, Pacific Island developments); (3) the national level (e.g., alliance politics, economic interdependence); and (4) the societal level (e.g., historical psychology, demographic change, media influence). These factors do not operate in isolation but interact with one another to shape threat perceptions. The framework also distinguishes between traditional security threats (military, territorial) and non-traditional security threats (climate, cyber, health), recognizing that these may have different causal pathways.

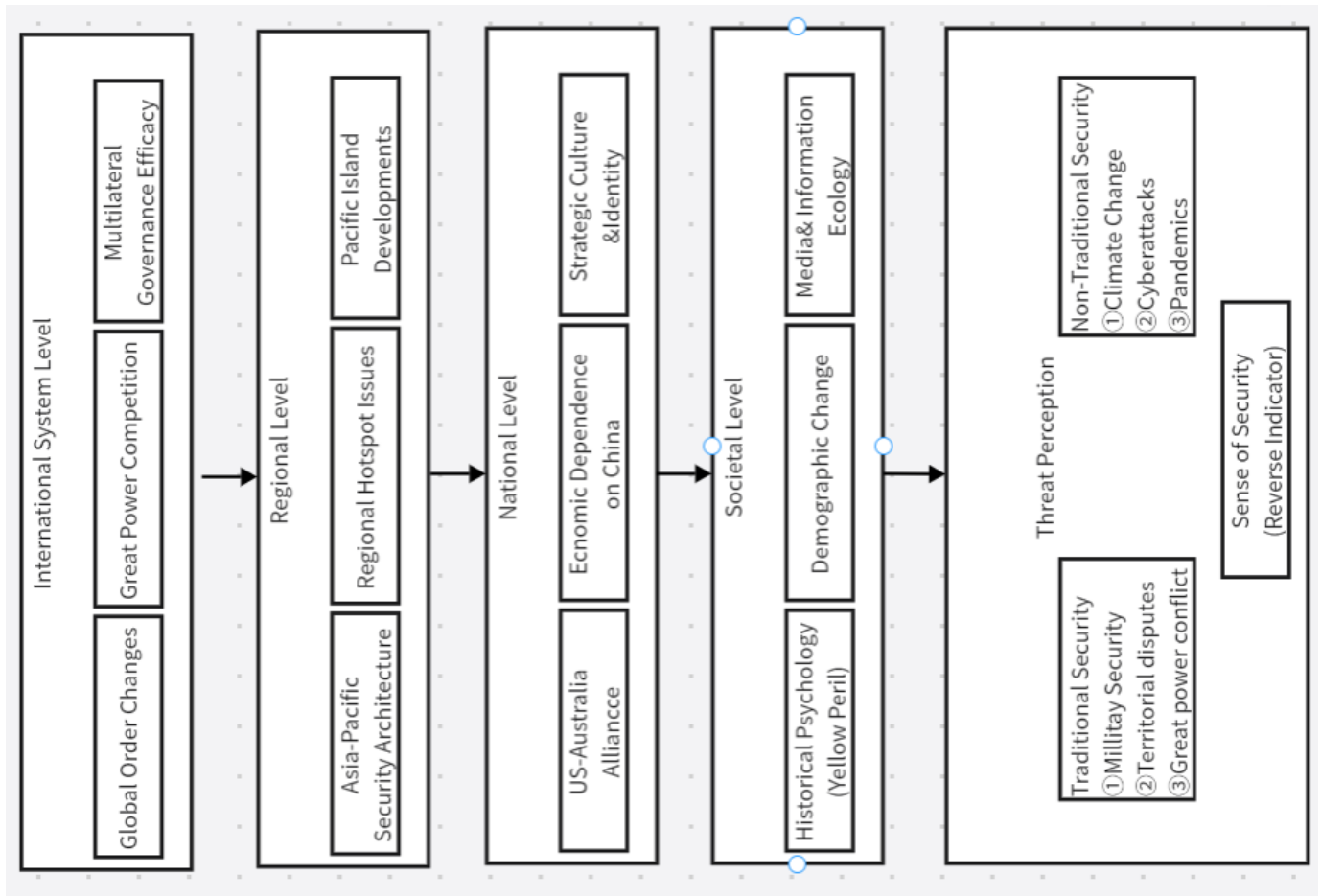


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Australia's Threat Perception

4. Findings

4.1 Overall Changes in Threat Perception

Table 1: Changes in the Proportion Feeling Secure in Lowy Institute Poll Reports

	Very Safe	Safe	Total
2005	30	61	91
2006	30	56	86
2007	40	50	90
2008	35	57	92
2009	44	46	90
2010	42	50	92
2015	24	56	80
2017	20	59	79
2018	18	60	78
2020	4	46	50
2021	6	64	70
2022	6	47	53
2023	6	57	63

Changes in the sense of security can intuitively measure the quantitative changes in overall threat perception. The data indicates (as shown in Table 1) that during the period 2005-2023, Australia's perceived sense of external security overall showed a downward trend, indicating a shift toward a risk-oriented security mindset. The sense of security developed steadily from initially strong levels to the first significant drop in 2015, followed by a second sharp drop in 2020 (currently at the lowest point), then fluctuating development.

4.2 Types of Threat Perception and Specific Changes

Regarding major threats to Australia’s vital interests in the next ten years, the frequently mentioned external threats in the reports mainly include: China’s development as a world power, Islamic fundamentalism, international terrorism, climate change (global warming), infectious diseases, the Taiwan Strait issue, cyberattacks from other countries, US foreign policy, China’s foreign policy, Russia’s foreign policy, North Korea’s nuclear weapons, environmental disasters (such as bushfires and floods), global economic downturn, interference in Australia by other countries, etc.

In terms of traditional security, Australia has always maintained vigilance and attention, perceiving the expansion of land conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, maritime security threats that cannot be ignored, with the North Korean nuclear issue and the Taiwan Strait issue being focal points. In 2017, Russian foreign policy was listed among the top ten important threats for the first time, with its perceived threat level surging in 2022 with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Also in 2017, the North Korean nuclear issue was first listed among the top ten important threats and remained stably at the forefront until 2023. In 2020, 35% of respondents viewed the Taiwan Strait issue as a top-ten important threat, surging to 64% in 2023. Regarding threat perception of other countries, Australia has consistently paid considerable attention to China. When answering whether China is more of an economic partner or a security threat to Australia, respondents increasingly viewed China as a security threat, with a significant increase in the proportion viewing China as a security threat between 2018 and 2020 (as shown in Table 2). When answering the question about the possibility of China becoming a military threat, respondents between 2018 and 2022 believed the possibility surged (as shown in Table 3). Regarding terrorism, the proportion of Australians viewing it as an important threat decreased uniformly from the initial 73% to 61% in 2019, saw a larger drop to 46% in 2020, and has since fluctuated without major overall changes.

Table 2: Proportion Viewing China as Economic Partner/Security

	Economic Partner	Security Threat
2015	77	15
2017	79	13
2018	82	12
2020	55	41
2021	34	63
2022	33	63
2023	44	52

Table 3: Proportion Viewing China as a Military Threat in Lowy Institute Poll Reports

	Very Possible	Possible	Total
2009	15	26	41
2010	19	27	46
2011	18	26	44
2012	14	26	40
2013	16	25	41
2014	19	29	48
2015	14	25	39
2017	15	31	46
2018	14	31	45
2022	32	43	75
2023	29	46	75

In terms of non-traditional security, Australia’s scope of concern has expanded, with higher sensitivity, particularly regarding climate change and cybersecurity receiving more attention. In

2020, concern over non-traditional security threats surpassed that of traditional security threats. Due to historical reasons, climate change has always received high attention in Australia (as shown in Table 4). Disasters such as bushfires and droughts have made Australia feel an existential threat. Australia believes it faces severe cyber threats, mainly including espionage and foreign interference, potential threats to critical infrastructure, and the weaponization of social media. Since 2014, cyberattacks from other countries have received more attention. In 2023, cyberattacks from other countries were viewed as the top important threat (as shown in Table 5).

Table 4: Percentage Viewing Climate Change as an Important Threat

Year	Percentage
2006	68
2008	66
2009	52
2014	46
2017	57
2018	58
2019	64
2020	59
2021	61
2022	62
2023	59

Table 5: Percentage Viewing Cyberattacks from Other Countries as an Important Threat

Year	Percentage
2014	51
2017	55
2018	57
2019	62
2021	62
2022	64
2023	68

4.3 Summary of Changes in Threat Perception

As a developed country located in the South Pacific region, Australia's perception of external threats has undergone profound and complex changes in the 21st century. Based on the Lowy Institute's poll data from 2005 to 2023, one can clearly observe the process of Australian society's understanding of the security environment shifting from relative optimism to cautious concern. This shift not only reflects the dynamic changes in the international order but also reveals the diversity and complexity of the security challenges Australia faces in the era of globalization.

Its cognitive foundation of security has shifted from stability to uncertainty. In the early 21st century, Australian society's perception of the security environment was relatively optimistic. The 2005 poll showed that over 90% of respondents believed Australia was safe or very safe. This cognitive foundation was built on several key factors: a relatively stable regional environment, sustained economic growth, and effective multilateral cooperation mechanisms. During this period, Australia's main security concerns were concentrated in the non-traditional security domain, particularly the threat of international terrorism. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 and their subsequent impact profoundly shaped security discussions during this period, viewing global terrorist networks as the most direct security challenge. However, this relatively stable cognitive state began to show a clear shift in the 2010s. Poll data shows that starting in 2015, the sense of security among the Australian public showed a continuous downward trend. This shift did not happen suddenly but was the result of the combined effect of multiple factors. Changes in the global power order, adjustments in the

regional security architecture, and the emergence of new security challenges gradually changed Australian society's understanding of the security environment. By 2020, the proportion of the public believing Australia was safe had dropped to 50%, a clear reflection of the significant shift in security cognition.

An important characteristic of Australia's perception of external threats is the diversification of threat sources. Traditionally, national security discussions mainly focused on military conflicts between state actors. However, the security environment of the 21st century presents more complex characteristics. According to poll data, the types of threats of concern to Australian society have expanded from a single dimension to multiple levels. At the military security level, regional hotspot issues remain the focus of attention. The nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, regional maritime security, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction continue to cause concern. Particularly since 2017, events such as North Korea's nuclear and missile tests have significantly increased regional military security pressure. At the same time, tensions in traditional major power relations are also seen as important factors potentially affecting regional stability. Concern over non-traditional security threats has increased significantly in recent years. The cybersecurity threat is a typical example. Polls show that the proportion of the public viewing cyberattacks as a major threat rose from 51% in 2014 to 68% in 2023, becoming one of the most concerning security threats. This change reflects the evolution of security threat forms in the digital age, with issues such as protection of critical infrastructure, data security, and personal privacy becoming increasingly prominent. Environmental security is another area of rising concern. Australian society's concern about climate change has always remained at a high level. In 2006, 68% of respondents believed climate change was a major threat; although this proportion fluctuated in subsequent years, it remained at a high level. Particularly during the 2019-2020 bushfire season, the scale and duration of the fires made the urgency of environmental security more prominent. Climate change is not only seen as an environmental issue but also understood as a security threat that may trigger resource shortages, humanitarian crises, and regional instability.

The importance of the economic dimension in security discussions has significantly increased. The long-term effect of the global financial crisis, the restructuring of global supply chains, and challenges to international economic governance mechanisms have all made economic security an important part of national security discussions. Poll data shows that issues such as global economic instability and changes in the trade system are increasingly seen as important factors that may affect national prosperity and security. This cognitive shift reflects deep-seated changes in the process of globalization. Economic interdependence, once viewed as a source of stability, is now revealing its vulnerabilities and drawing increasing scrutiny. Global crises such as the pandemic have further highlighted the importance of issues like supply chain security, energy security, and food security. The boundaries between economic security and traditional security are increasingly blurred, forming a more complex map of security cognition.

The regional security architecture is also changing. Changes in the security environment of the Pacific region have had an important impact on Australia's threat perception. Development challenges faced by Pacific Island countries, the impacts of climate change, and governance issues are all seen as factors that may affect regional stability. As a regional power, Australia's attention to these issues reflects its emphasis on the surrounding security environment. At the same time, the effectiveness of multilateral security mechanisms has sparked more discussion. The evolution of the regional security architecture, the implementation of international law norms, and the effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms have all become components of security considerations. This concern reflects deep thinking about whether a rules-based international order can continue to maintain regional peace and stability.

The evolution of Australia's perception of external threats reveals a diversified, multi-layered map of security concepts. From a relatively narrow focus on traditional security concerns, it has developed into a comprehensive security cognition encompassing military, economic, environmen-

tal, cyber, public health, and other multiple dimensions. This transformation reflects both the profound changes in the international security environment and the modernization process of national security concepts. The current security cognition emphasizes the economic interdependence and systematic nature of threats, with challenges in different fields influencing each other, forming complex security governance problems. This cognitive shift has already been reflected at the policy level, promoting the formation of a more comprehensive and integrated national security strategy. Understanding this cognitive evolution process not only helps grasp the direction of Australia's security policy but also has important insights for understanding the complexity of the contemporary international security environment. In the future, Australia's perception of external threats may continue to maintain its characteristics of diversification and dynamism. Continuously developing factors such as technological progress, environmental changes, and geopolitical adjustments will continue to shape the evolution of security cognition. In this context, maintaining the objectivity, comprehensiveness, and foresight of security cognition will become the key to effectively responding to security challenges.

5. Attribution of Australia's Threat Perception

5.1 Attribution of Overall Threat Perception

Changes in the global economic order are an important background influencing Australia's perception of external threats. The 2008 global financial crisis was the first important turning point. This crisis not only exposed the vulnerability of the global economic system but also made Australia aware of the close connection between its own economic security and the global financial environment. As a developed country highly dependent on international trade, Australia's economic lifeline is closely linked to global markets. Changes in the international trade system, the restructuring of global supply chains, and uncertainties in economic growth models are all directly related to Australia's national security. In recent years, the effectiveness of global economic governance mechanisms has been challenged in many ways. The reform process of the multilateral trading system is slow, regional economic cooperation arrangements continue to emerge, and the rapid development of the digital economy brings new regulatory gaps. These changes together constitute a complex economic security environment. Australian society's perception of economic globalization has gradually shifted from opportunity-oriented to risk-aware, and this shift is directly reflected in changes in the perception of external threats.

The importance of environmental factors in Australia's threat perception continues to rise, which is closely related to its unique geographical location and ecological environment. Australia is the driest inhabited continent globally, with a relatively fragile ecosystem, making it particularly sensitive to the impacts of climate change. The 2019-2020 bushfire season was of symbolic significance. The months-long ecological disaster brought home the very real and urgent threat to environmental security in Australia. The direct impacts of climate change are manifested in several aspects: frequent extreme weather events, adjustment pressures on agricultural production models, and increasingly prominent water resource security issues. More importantly, climate change is also seen as a threat multiplier that may exacerbate regional resource competition and humanitarian crises. The sea-level rise faced by Pacific Island countries is a typical example; the spillover effects of these problems may affect the stability of the entire region. Biosecurity is another important dimension. The outbreak of the pandemic highlighted the suddenness and destructiveness of cross-border public health crises. As an island nation, Australia, while having natural advantages in epidemic prevention, also faces multiple challenges such as supply chain disruptions and pressure on the medical system. The characteristic of such non-traditional security threats is that they cross national borders, affect entire areas, and are difficult to address using traditional geopolitical frameworks.

The rapid development of digital technology is reshaping the forms of security threats. The evolution of cybersecurity threats is particularly significant, developing from early individual

hacker activities to organized cyberattacks today, with qualitative changes in threat actors, methods, and targets. The digitization of critical infrastructure increases the vulnerability of core systems such as energy, finance, and transportation; any fluctuation in cyberspace may trigger chain reactions in the real world. The militarization application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data is changing the forms of security competition. The development of autonomous weapon systems, the enhancement of cyber warfare capabilities, and the trend of militarization in the space domain are all expanding the dimensions of security threats. These technological developments not only create new areas of confrontation but also blur the lines between peace and conflict, making threat assessment and response more complex. Technological development also brings new challenges in the cognitive domain. Changes in information dissemination models, the reshaping of public opinion ecology by social media, and changes in knowledge production methods in the digital age are all affecting society's perception and judgment of threats. These changes make traditional security concepts based on geographical boundaries need updating, requiring the establishment of a more three-dimensional framework for security cognition.

Changes in the demographic structure and values of Australian society indirectly influence the perception of external threats. The continuous growth of the immigrant population makes Australian society's connection with the outside world more diverse, while also bringing new topics in cultural identity, social integration, etc. In an increasingly diverse society, the definition and prioritization of security threats naturally present more complex characteristics. The generational change in divergent views cannot be ignored. The younger generation, growing up in a globalized environment, pays more attention to emerging threats such as climate change and digital security. This generational difference is reflected in the ranking and perception of various threats. The evolution of social values continuously increases the weight of issues such as human rights and environmental protection in security discussions. The anxiety of the middle class also influences threat perception. In a period where the globalization process faces adjustments, internal concerns such as job security, quality of life assurance, and the sustainability of social welfare interact subtly with external threat perception. This internal worry is often projected onto judgments about the external environment, giving security discussions a characteristic of internal-external linkage.

The power balance and order evolution in the Asia-Pacific region are realities Australia must face. The rapid economic development of the region has brought about readjustments in interest relations, and differences among countries in development paths and governance models present new topics for regional cooperation. The evolution of the regional institutional network, the reshaping of cooperation mechanisms, and the formation of normative consensus are all full of uncertainty, directly affecting Australia's assessment of the security environment. The development trends in the Pacific Island region deserve attention. The development challenges, climate change threats, and governance difficulties faced by these countries may have regional impacts. As an important country in the region, Australia naturally maintains a high level of attention to these factors that may affect regional stability. Maintaining order in the maritime domain is also an important consideration. As a maritime nation with a long coastline, the security of sea lanes, marine resource development, and marine environmental governance are all core interests of Australia. The formation of rules in related fields, the establishment of maritime cooperation mechanisms, and the improvement of frameworks for managing unexpected incidents all relate to Australia's security environment.

The effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms is challenged in many ways. Traditional global governance institutions seem inadequate in addressing emerging issues, and slow reform processes raise questions about their representativeness. At the same time, various new cooperation mechanisms continue to emerge, forming a more complex institutional ecosystem. This fragmentation trend increases the difficulty of international coordination and also creates more uncertainty in the provision of global public goods. The complexity of cross-border issues exceeds the coping capacity of existing governance frameworks. Issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, and public health all have typical cross-border characteristics, requiring countries to coordinate positions and

respond jointly. However, at the practical level, issues such as balancing national interests with global public goods, differences in demands at different development stages, and the fairness of burden-sharing make specific cooperation difficult to deepen. The weakening of normative consensus increases the uncertainty of international interaction. Differences in understanding among different countries and civilizations are gradually appearing in foundational normative areas such as the interpretation of international law, human rights protection, and the principle of sovereignty. This divergence at the normative level makes international cooperation lack stable expectations and also increases the risk of miscalculation.

Australia's geographical location characteristics are the starting point of its security thinking. As an island continent located in the Southern Hemisphere, Australia enjoys a certain sense of security brought by geographical isolation, but also faces a sense of loneliness arising from the distance to major civilization centers. This unique geopolitical position shapes Australians' special sensitivity to the security environment. Historical experiences also influence threat perception at the subconscious level. From the early colonial settlement to a modern nation, Australia's development process includes concern for resource security, special emphasis on trade routes, and a natural vigilance towards changes in distant strategic situations. These historical memories, while not directly determining current threat assessments, constitute the deep background of cognition. The evolution of national identity is also worth noting. As a modern immigrant nation, Australia is continuously constructing its national identity. This self-perception in the process of identity construction inevitably affects the understanding of the "other," thereby influencing the judgment of external threats. These subtle factors at the cultural psychological level, together with other more specific threat sources, shape Australia's security concept.

5.2 Attribution of Threat Perception Regarding China

This section will analyze the reasons for Australia's formation of threat perception regarding China from historical, economic, and political perspectives.

Historically, as a European country adjacent to Asia, Australia is geographically close but culturally distant from Asia. A deep distrust of neighboring countries has shaped its tradition of seeking protection from Western powers for security. Australia originated as a modern nation during the British colonial period. Its mother country complex towards Britain coexisted with the Yellow Peril regarding Asia. Accompanying the cultural genes of Britain was Australia's deep-rooted racial discrimination against its Asian neighbors. Discourses about the Yellow Peril in Australia can be traced back to the gold rush period in the 1850s. In the view of Australians at that time, Asians were "evil and cunning," "spreading diseases," "stealing jobs," and were an "inferior race." In the early 20th century, the personified image of the Yellow Peril, "Fu Manchu," created by British writer Sax Rohmer, became widespread in Australia. After federation, Australia immediately introduced the White Australia Policy aimed at restricting Asian immigration; this policy was not abolished until the 1970s, but its poison persists to this day. Therefore, its threat perceptions surrounding China, such as China's development as a world power, whether to restrict Chinese economic investment in it, worries that China might open a military base in a Pacific Island country, etc., have historical roots.

Economically, as an export-oriented economy, the formation and development of Australia's modern economy were largely driven by external forces, initially Britain and the United States, later Japan, China, etc. For Australia, maintaining its own development capacity and creating a regional environment conducive to development is inherent in its national security. The concept of "economic security is national security" has always run through Australia's national security strategy. Benefiting from the industrialization and urbanization of East Asian countries, Australia's resource exports continued to grow, especially after entering the 21st century, the strong complementarity with China's economy helped usher in Australia's largest "mining boom" in history and made it the only developed country not to fall into recession during the global financial crisis. In 2009, China surpassed Japan to become Australia's largest trading partner, largest export market,

and source of imports, a status that continues to this day. The stronger Australia's economic dependence on China, the more it fears the threats that Chinese investment might pose to Australia.

Politically, as a middle power with unique geopolitical characteristics in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia's foreign strategy has long faced contradictions and collisions between identity and national interests, showing phased adjustments and evolution after World War II, such as alliance priority, engagement with Asia, and deputy to the hegemon. Since 2017, Australia has further served the United States' major power competition strategy, acting as the so-called "Indo-Pacific standard-bearer". At this stage, Australia spared no effort in creating friction and disputes regarding China: from so-called "coercive diplomacy" to "Asian Monroe Doctrine", to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, moving from major power balancing to choosing sides and balancing strategy. After the Labor government came to power in May 2022, Australia began to gradually restore some communication channels with China.

The mainstream consciousness in Australia believes that the Asia-Pacific region is widely populated with hotspot issues such as the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Sino-Indian border, as well as intensifying regional security dilemmas and arms races. The risk and cost of these issues getting out of control are high, and only the continued strong presence of the United States and its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region can maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, the foundation of Australia's security strategy is to strengthen the US-Australia alliance. Australia and the United States share common cultural values, security interests, and strategic goals. Successive Australian governments have regarded the US-Australia alliance mechanism as the cornerstone of their defence policy, actively welcoming and supporting the key role played by the United States in the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Strengthening the US-Australia alliance can show Australia's international status and help Australia play a more important role in the Asia-Pacific region.

Since the establishment of the US-Australia alliance, Australia has regarded it as the cornerstone of diplomacy and defence. Its assessment of the strategic environment and threat perception is highly convergent with that of its ally, the United States. Accordingly, it formulates security strategies, allocates resources, and builds capabilities, exchanging support for the US with security protection, intelligence support, and the maintenance of regional political and economic influence from the US.

When facing issues like the Taiwan Strait, where conflicts arise between China and the US, as a party to the US-Australia alliance, Australia worries about being involved in, therefore Australia views China as its security threat.

6. Summary

Based on the Lowy Institute's poll reports from 2005-2023, this paper analyzed the types of Australia's external threat perception, changes in its threat perception, and the reasons for its external threat perception. Australia's perception of external threats has changed in both traditional and non-traditional security domains. In the traditional security domain, this is manifested as a perception of the expansion of land conflicts, changes in maritime threat perception, changes in the degree of threat perception regarding China, and a gradual weakening of the perception of the terrorist threat. In the non-traditional security domain, particularly concerning climate security and cybersecurity, Australia's sensitivity to threats has increased, and their scope is perceived as expanding.

The evolution of Australia's external threat perception is the result of the combined effect of multiple factors. These factors are distributed across different levels, from specific environmental changes to abstract cultural psychology, from immediate economic shocks to long-term technological changes, constituting a complex driving system. Understanding the operating mechanism of this system requires not only analyzing the specific impact of each factor but also grasping the interactive relationships between them. Another characteristic of this cognitive evolution is its

spontaneity. In the modern society with highly fluid information, the public's judgment of the security environment is often based on observable facts and experienceable changes. The heat of forest fires, the inconvenience of pandemic lockdowns, the impact of economic fluctuations—these concrete experiences shape people's perception of security threats more than any theoretical explanation.

Regarding the reasons for its formation of threat perception towards China, from a historical perspective, its "British cultural genes" and deep-rooted racial discrimination against Asian neighbors form its historical roots. From an economic perspective, its economic dependence on China is strong; on one hand, it hopes to strengthen economic exchanges with China, on the other hand, it worries about China interfering too much. From a political perspective, the US-Australia alliance makes it difficult for Australia to balance the relationship between economic partners and security allies as it did in the past when facing conflicts of interest between China and the US.

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