Why the US alliance matters

– and what happens if it falters

FOR MORE THAN 70 years, Australia's alliance with the United States has been the cornerstone of its defence policy, providing both a strategic umbrella and a force multiplier for the nation's defence.

From intelligence sharing and advanced military technology to access to high-end training, logistics and sustainment pipelines, the alliance delivers the Australian Defence Force (ADF) operational credibility well beyond what its size and geography would otherwise allow. The 2021 AUKUS agreement further deepens this, granting access to nuclear-powered submarines, autonomous systems and advanced missile technologies, capabilities that would be out of reach if Australia were to stand alone.

But what if the alliance weakens? In the worst-case scenario, a rupture driven by US retrenchment, shifting strategic priorities or political divergence would have a profound impact on the ADF. Australia would be forced to fund and field a vastly more independent military posture, including the sovereign development of long-range deterrent systems, space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and cyber resilience at scale. Without US satellite coverage, munitions supply chains or integrated C4ISR, the ADF's reach and effectiveness would rapidly shrink. Defence spending would have to increase sharply, likely well above 3.5% of GDP to even attempt strategic self-reliance, let alone generate genuine deterrence.

Even a 'watered-down' alliance – where Washington becomes more transactional or less engaged in the Indo-Pacific – would shift the burden onto Canberra to compensate with regional partnerships, new industrial bases and sovereign capabilities. The ADF would face longer lead times to access or integrate cutting-edge US platforms, such as stealth aircraft or hypersonic missiles. Interoperability would erode. Intelligence flows would lessen and slow. And Australia's freedom of action in crisis scenarios would be constrained, especially without the assurance of a US presence in the region.

Ultimately, the alliance is not just about hardware; it's about deterrence, posture and credibility. The knowledge that Australia operates within a US-led security framework shapes adversary calculations. If that framework weakens or disappears, those calculations change fast.

Australia should prepare for all scenarios. That means deepening alliance ties now, while also investing in sovereign capabilities, regional partnerships and 'fight tonight' readiness.

The future of the US-Australia alliance is not guaranteed. But its loss or dilution would leave the ADF exposed, underpowered and at greater risk of defeat in a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment. DTR

ABOVE: US Marines with Marine Rotational Force – Darwin 25.3 disembark an MV-22B Osprey tilt-rotor during an integration check at Robertson Barracks, Darwin, on 15 June 2025. *Image: USMC*

Ian Langford
The Langford Files
ABOUT THE AUTHOR