

## Book Review

# Review of Bec Strating and Joanne Wallis' *Girt by Sea: Australia, the Indo-Pacific and the Contest for Maritime Order*, La Trobe University Press, 2024.

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Bec Strating's and Joanne Wallis' *Girt by Sea: Australia, the Indo-Pacific and the Contest for Maritime Order* is a comprehensive analysis of Australia's maritime strategy within the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

The book is a timely exploration of the strategic imperatives driving Australia's foreign policy, particularly in the face of rising tensions and competing interests among regional powers.

Strating and Wallis situate their analysis within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific, a term that has gained currency over the past decade to conceptualise the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This geopolitical reimagining underscores the importance of maritime domains in international relations and highlights the strategic stakes for countries like Australia, which is "girt by sea" on all sides. Strating and Wallis' analysis has interesting implications for readers interested in engagement between universities/academics and local communities in the Indo-Pacific region, including through providing an enhanced framework for geopolitical awareness when navigating regional politics.

The book's relevance cannot be overstated, as it addresses contemporary issues such as the rise of China, the strategic realignment of the United States, and the roles of other significant players like India and Japan. Strating and Wallis delve into how these dynamics shape Australia's security environment and its maritime strategy, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the complexities at play. Further implications for the university sector include promoting sustainable and inclusive development. In terms of the long-term impact, *Girt by Sea's* emphasis on sustainable development means universities should design community engagement (CE) projects that address immediate needs and contribute to the long-term

well-being and resilience of Pacific communities. Moreover, in regard to inclusivity, one of the broader messages of *Girt by Sea* is that projects should prioritise inclusivity, ensuring they benefit all community members, including marginalised groups. This approach fosters equity and social cohesion.

*Girt by Sea* is meticulously organized into several chapters, each dissecting different facets of Australia's maritime policy and strategy. Strating and Wallis begin with a historical overview, providing a foundation for understanding the evolution of Australia's maritime interests. They then transition into a detailed examination of current geopolitical challenges and the strategic responses they necessitate. Strating and Wallis begin by tracing the development of modern Australia's maritime identity, from its colonial beginnings to its present-day strategic concerns. This historical perspective is crucial, as it illustrates how past events and policies have shaped contemporary attitudes and strategies. The book then shifts focus to the Indo-Pacific region, analysing the strategic interests and actions of major regional players. Strating and Wallis pay particular attention to China's maritime expansion and the United States' pivot toward Asia, contextualising their impacts on Australia's security calculus.

Strating and Wallis explore Australia's policy responses to these regional dynamics, including its Defense strategies, alliances, and diplomatic engagements. They provide an in-depth look at key initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the AUKUS pact, assessing their implications for regional stability and Australia's strategic positioning. Another significant aspect of the book is its focus on maritime law and security. Strating and Wallis discuss Australia's role in upholding international maritime norms and the challenges posed by differing interpretations of laws like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The final chapters offer a forward-looking perspective, contemplating the future of the Indo-Pacific maritime order and Australia's role within it. Strating and Wallis consider various scenarios, from increased cooperation to heightened conflict, and what they would mean for Australia's strategic interests. Implications for the university sector include the broader message, woven throughout *Girt by Sea*, to respect local knowledge and practices. Cultural Competence is a poignant aspect of the book. Strating and Wallis highlight the importance of understanding and respecting local cultures and knowledge systems. Universities should incorporate local knowledge

into their projects, ensuring they are culturally relevant and accepted by the community. Another key point throughout the *Girt by Sea* is the importance of collaboration with local stakeholders. Strating and Wallis argue that by engaging local stakeholders in the planning and implementation phases ensures that projects are grounded in the actual needs and preferences of the community.

Strating and Wallis' central thesis is that Australia's maritime strategy is at a critical juncture, shaped by external pressures and internal imperatives. Several key themes emerge throughout the book. Strating and Wallis argue that Australia must balance its desire for strategic autonomy with its reliance on alliances, particularly with the United States. This duality is a recurring theme, reflecting the complexities of maintaining sovereignty while ensuring security through partnerships. Another theme present throughout the book is the tension between upholding a rules-based international order and navigating the realities of power politics is another prominent theme. Strating highlights Australia's commitment to international norms and the challenges it faces from countries that pursue more unilateral or revisionist policies.

Strating and Wallis' *Girt by Sea* is a well-researched and insightful contribution





to the literature on maritime strategy and Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Their analysis is grounded in a thorough understanding of historical and contemporary dynamics, making the book both informative and thought-provoking. One of the book's strengths is its balanced approach. Strating and Wallis do not shy away from

critiquing Australia's policies where warranted, while also acknowledging the complexities and constraints policymakers face. This balanced perspective lends credibility to her arguments and makes the book a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners.

Moreover, Strating and Wallis' ability to connect theoretical concepts with practical implications is commendable. They adeptly bridge the gap between abstract strategic considerations and concrete policy actions, providing readers with a holistic understanding of the issues at hand. Further implications

include that by listening to the research contained in *Girt by Sea*, the university sector may strengthen both governance and institutional capacity. Universities can play a critical role in building the capacity of local institutions through training, education, and resource

transparency, accountability, and community participation.

*Girt by Sea: Australia, the Indo-Pacific and the Contest for Maritime Order* is a comprehensive and timely examination of Australia's maritime strategy in a

The authors' balanced analysis, coupled with their ability to connect theoretical and practical dimensions, makes this book a significant contribution to the field of maritime studies and international relations. Despite its academic density, it is an essential

read for anyone seeking to understand the intricacies of Indo-Pacific geopolitics and Australia's place within it. The usefulness for practitioners includes the guiding of ethical and effective engagement. The book offers an ethical framework for engagement, emphasizing the importance of partnerships based on respect, mutual benefit, and empowerment. Practitioners can use this framework to guide their interactions with Pacific communities. Practitioners could potentially derive best practices from the book's case studies and analyses, applying lessons learned to their own projects. Furthermore, the detailed



sharing. This support helps strengthen governance and fosters local leadership. One of the key messages of *Girt by Sea* is the importance of supporting local governance. University projects should support and enhance local governance structures, promoting

rapidly changing regional landscape. The book offers valuable insights into the historical and contemporary factors shaping Australia's strategic decisions and highlights the challenges and opportunities ahead.

analysis of the Pacific context helps practitioners design projects that are contextually appropriate and sensitive to local conditions. This understanding leads to more effective and sustainable interventions. By highlighting potential risks and challenges, the book enables

practitioners to develop robust risk management strategies, ensuring projects can adapt to changing conditions and mitigate adverse impacts.

Strating and Wallis focus their analysis on Australia's maritime security, emphasizing the importance of regional rather than distant security concerns. The book covers six crucial maritime domains: the Timor, Arafura, and Coral Seas, the Torres Strait, the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Southern Ocean. By centring their discussion on these areas, the authors advocate for a shift in Australian strategic thinking towards more immediate regional concerns.

One of the book's core arguments is the need to broaden the concept of security to include economic stability, environmental sustainability, political integrity, and public health. Strating and Wallis argue that these factors are as critical to national security as traditional military considerations. For instance, they highlight how climate change poses significant risks to Australia's security, suggesting that environmental policies should be integral to national Defense strategies. In terms of implications for the tertiary sector, insights from the book can help practitioners identify key

stakeholders and build strong networks of collaboration, both within the Pacific and with external partners. These networks are crucial for the success and scalability of projects. Throughout the book, practitioners are encouraged to leverage local expertise and involve local partners in all stages of project development, ensuring projects are locally owned and driven.

The book also takes a critical look at Australia's relationship with major global powers, particularly the United States and China. It questions the reliance on the US as a security guarantor and explores the complexities of the relationship with China, presenting both the threats and opportunities it poses. This dual perspective is crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of international relations in the Indo-Pacific region. The book provides evidence and arguments that practitioners can use to advocate for supportive policies and funding from governments and international organizations. Practitioners can use insights from the book to raise awareness and influence public opinion on the importance of engaging ethically and effectively with Pacific communities.

Strating and Wallis incorporate historical contexts and Indigenous perspectives into their analysis, advocating for

recognition of First Nations' insights into security and land stewardship. This inclusion adds depth to their critique of contemporary security policies, suggesting that modern strategies can benefit from traditional knowledge and practices. This approach aligns with a broader trend in international relations that seeks to decolonize and diversify the field.

*Girt by Sea* is a significant contribution to the discourse on national security, offering fresh perspectives and urging a shift towards more holistic and regionally focused strategies. While some may find its tone too cautious, the book's thorough research and innovative approach make it a must-read for anyone interested in the future of Australia's security policies. By integrating economic, environmental, and social factors into their analysis, Strating and Wallis provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the security challenges facing Australia today. In summary, *Girt By Sea* by Strating and Wallis is a valuable resource for Australian universities and practitioners engaging with Pacific communities. It provides crucial insights into the regional context, promotes sustainable and inclusive development, and offers practical guidance for ethical and effective engagement.