

YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



**FROM ORDER TO
DISORDER: AUSTRALIA'S
PAST DECADE IN
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

SPECIAL PUBLICATION



**For our friend,
Henry Heritage**

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its ten years in operation, YAIA has witnessed considerable changes in international affairs. 2014 was a time of relative global stability: great power politics was largely settled, and international trade flourished in a world that appeared evermore connected. Though conflict and humanitarian crises gripped parts of the world, for the most part – and certainly looking back – things appeared to be steadily improving.

As time went on, however, the international landscape showed signs of fracturing. Elections saw increased support for populist figures and movements sceptical of democratic institutions. Shocks to trade compounded by the diversification of labour markets and industries contributed to growing dissatisfaction with the prospect of continuous economic growth across much of the Global North. Much of the burgeoning Global South would express its discontent with the status quo that had been determined and upheld by the North, and pursue its own agenda for sovereign and regional governance.

Yet, since 2014, the world has simultaneously flourished in new and unforeseen ways. Small and middle powers have risen to enormous heights, in many cases eclipsing the colonial powers of which they were once part. New technological capabilities have burst onto the global scene, giving rise to both enormous social and economic opportunities and costs. Increased global connectivity, once considered exclusively beneficial, has proven a double-edged sword, exposing us to new and more acute disruptions such as a deteriorating global ecosystem, pronounced health and humanitarian crises, increased opportunities for surveillance and espionage, and pathological economic and political dependencies.

This special YAIA publication conducts a thematic analysis of the top ten developments in Australia's international affairs outlook over the past decade.



1 Peering beyond the end of history

Perhaps the starkest change to Australia's international outlook in the past ten years has been the gradual erosion of the rules-based global order (RBGO). Defined by international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), adherence to democratic norms, and respect for the rule of law, the RBGO has been the central mechanism by which Australia has exercised international influence and achieved its foreign policy objectives. Yet, since 2014, a rising wave of disenchantment with the RBGO has taken hold across world polities. Fuelled by populist and anti-establishment sentiment, it has resulted in a diminution of the international order's effectiveness.

This pervasive dissatisfaction has resulted in significant changes to the global political makeup. Though in 2014 the world looked to be tracking towards greater democratisation, the years that followed saw the most significant degree of democratic backsliding in living memory [1]. Authoritarian powers have continued to rise, and are increasingly belligerent toward the norms and law for which the international community stands.





Unfettered global trade, seen by many as the *raison d'être* for the RBGO, has also contributed to the slow demise of the international order in the past decade. 2014 was a time of historically unparalleled trade connectivity, with proposed deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership opening up new opportunities for increased economic engagement for states across the Indo-Pacific. The COVID-19 pandemic and episodes such as the Red Sea trade crisis have since showcased the inherent vulnerabilities of such unfettered global trade and forced states to reconsider revitalising their domestic production of critical goods.

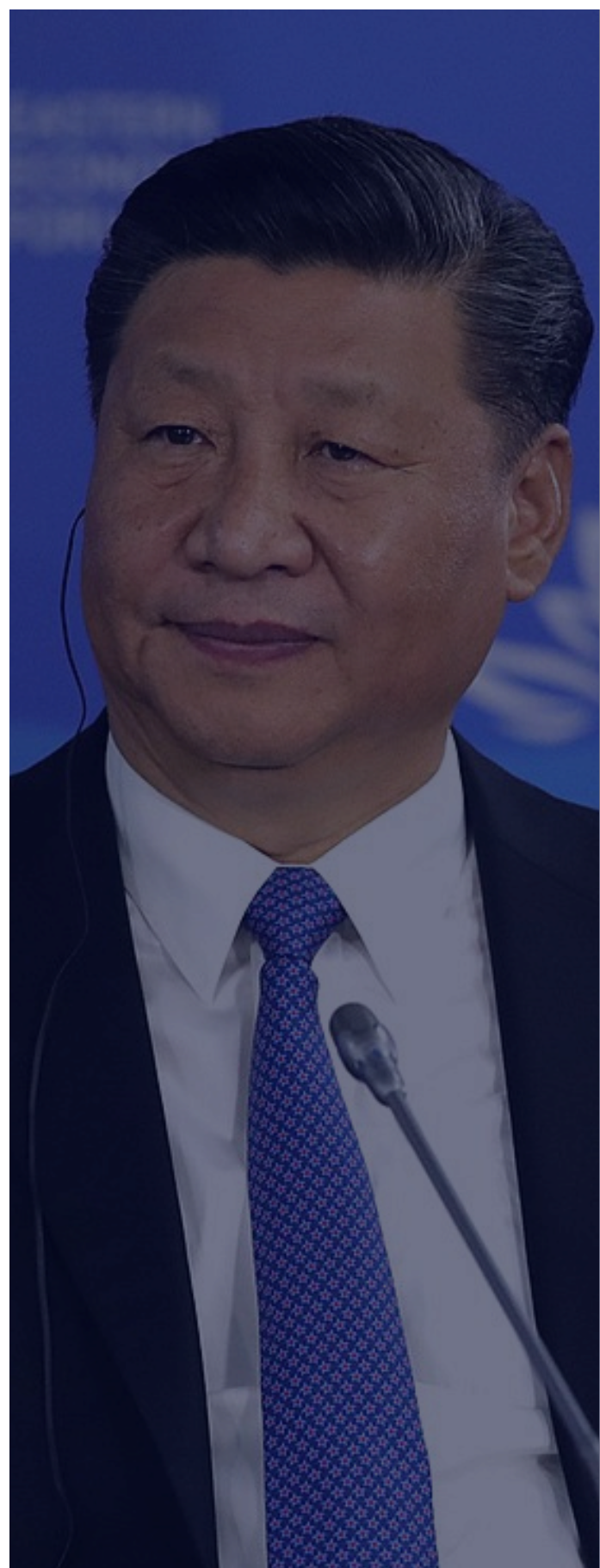
The challenges to the RBGO since 2014 have signalled a decisive shift in global political trajectories. Will the trend of populism and democratic scepticism continue, resulting in the complete fragmentation of the global order? Or, will the system endure what will prove to be a momentary deviation from the norm?



2 China to the east, India to the west

Throughout the early twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific has become the epicentre of the international system, the global economy, and contemporary geopolitics. Spanning the geographic territory of India to the United States (US), the Indo-Pacific is home to over half of the world's population and 60 per cent of its GDP [2]. It is also fast becoming a major theatre of great power competition between the US and China. Other actors, such as India and Japan, and regional blocs including ASEAN and the Blue Pacific, are also increasingly jostling for their own power and influence in the world's most dynamic and consequential region.

China's unprecedented growth to economic superpower in 2014 was quickly followed by a resurgence of longstanding territory disputes in the East and South China Sea, resulting in increasingly coercive behaviours towards the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, and other states.





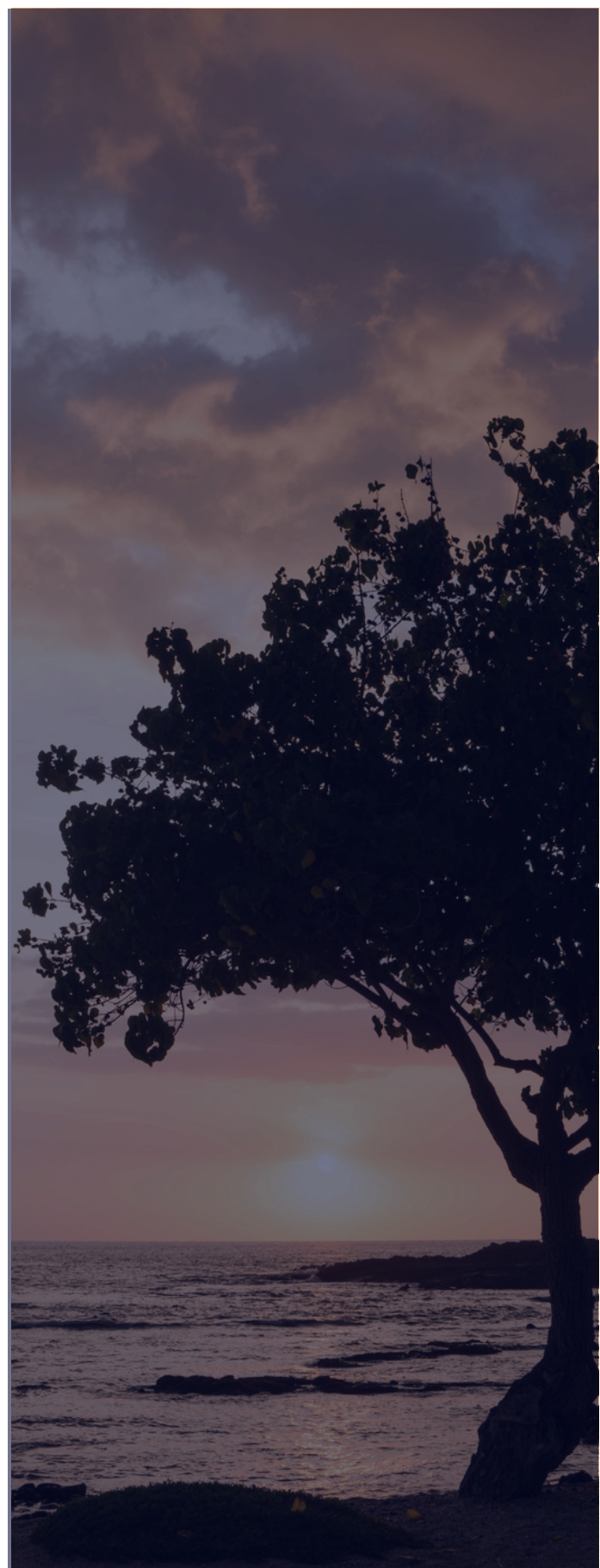
Similar reprisals were enacted on those who voiced international support for democracy in Hong Kong in 2019, and in the following year in response to Australia's vocal calls for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19. For some, China's growing willingness to bluntly exercise its state interests signals its intent to oust the US' influence in the Indo-Pacific. However, a fatalistic approach to the rise of China is unfounded. The oft-cited Thucydides Trap has yet to spring—and indeed it may never do so.

In contrast, India, seen by many as a potential balancer for the region, remains a relatively distant prospect as competitor for regional dominance or global polarity. While India bears some characteristic similarities with China - namely its large population and immense economic potential - India struggles to curb corruption, equitably distribute prosperity among its people, provide widespread social services, and achieve economic gender equality [3]. India has instead exercised regional influence through successfully developing its physical and digital infrastructure, expanding its economy, and better integrating into the regional and international system.



The rise of smaller regional powers in the Indo-Pacific has also complicated the regional power balance. In response to the increasing vocality of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, Australia is reshaping its diplomatic corps, developing an expansive 'whole of society' approach to statecraft, and focusing its diplomatic resources on capacity building and responsive investment.

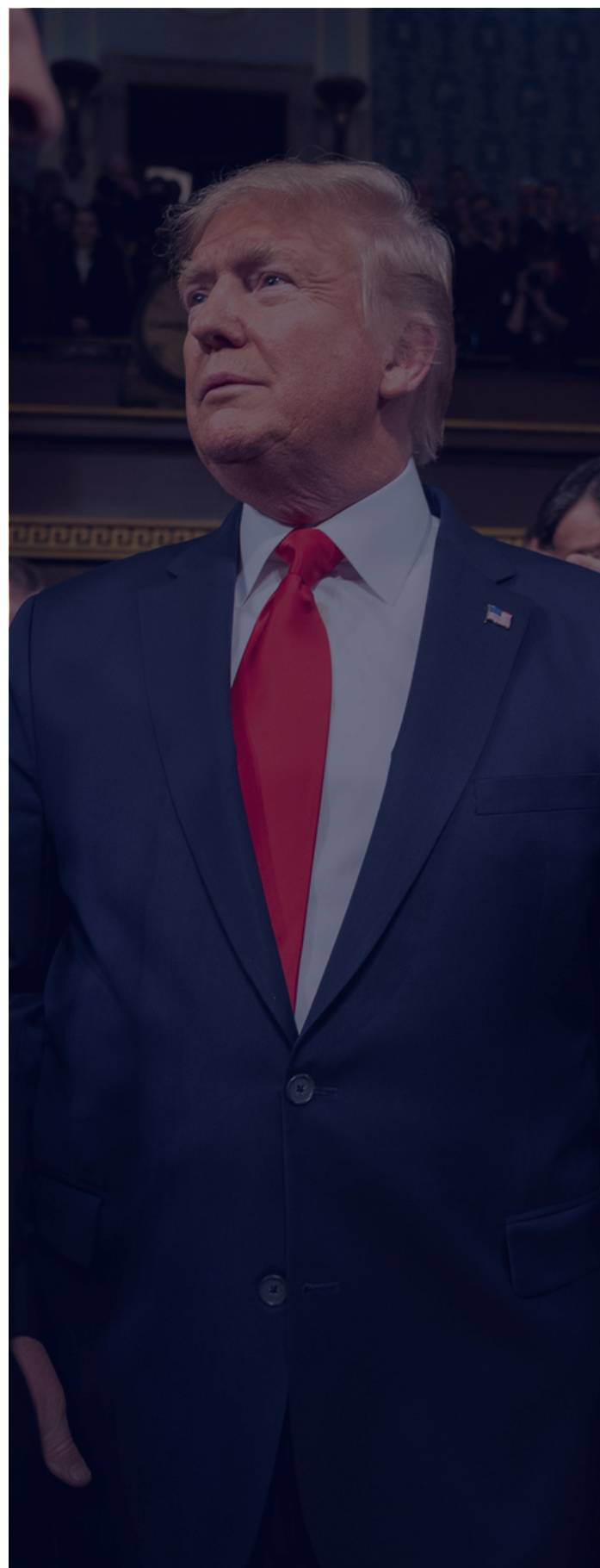
Going forward, the complexities of multipolarity must be carefully understood, appreciated, and navigated, and not categorically reduced to narratives of inevitability. Australia and other Indo-Pacific states should also look with a shrewd eye for the bountiful opportunities that this period simultaneously presents.



3 America in decline

2014 in many ways marked the beginning of the end for American global power primacy. The country that had defined the post-Second World War global order and triumphed over the Soviet Union would receive successive hits to its credibility throughout the early twenty-first century. Multiple wars in the Middle East and the Global Financial Crisis would seed the territory for a resurgent nationalism to take hold in the US during the mid-2010s. The 2016 success of Donald Trump's unique brand of American exceptionalism among key disaffected populations astounded critics and pollsters, and overturned generations of political convention. Rash, explicit outbursts and an aggressive policy agenda – often affecting marginalised populations – became a fixture of the Trump White House.

The replacement of Trump in 2020 would not see a return to the norm for American democracy. Joe Biden, though perceived internationally as a stabler pair of hands, would preside over some of America's most challenging felt economic conditions in modern history [4].





Biden's foreign policy record would also be scrutinised. Nearly twenty years to the day of the September 11 attacks and atop countless lives lost, the US pulled out of Afghanistan, abandoning its military equipment and operations and effectively handing Kabul over to the Taliban.

In spite of the US' waning international credibility, Australia's support for its stalwart ally was unequivocally renewed through AUKUS. This trilateral partnership, consisting of Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom remains predicated on the construction of conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, and enhanced mutual technology transfer and information sharing across critical domains. Though the US' commitment to its allies and partners has been called into question following perceived failures in Afghanistan and Ukraine, Australia remains firmly supportive of its mateship with its historic security partner. Whether a Republican or Democrat sits in the White House after Biden, Australia will be there for the ride.



4 War never changes

Australia's devotion to AUKUS and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a testament to a global era of uncertainty and a reaction to the highest levels of conflict since the Second World War [5]. It underscores the prioritisation of value- and norm-based partnerships, and the reprioritisation of hard power assets, including deterrence, for a new age of conflict.

In 2014, much of the Western world was enveloped in the crises that surrounded Syria's civil war. ISIS quickly proved itself capable of exporting its war into neighbouring countries, as well as establishing terrorist cells in Europe and North America. At the same time, Russia took its first step toward its eventual large scale ground war with Ukraine in 2022 by annexing Crimea. For much of Europe and parts of Africa, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War has strengthened the priority of economic diversification and resource sovereignty as Russian oil and gas continues to flow and grain exports falter.





Although Australia and its allies have committed considerable amounts of materiel and financial and diplomatic support, victory – and how it is defined – does not yet appear in sight for the Ukrainian people. How far will Putin go, and how many lives is he willing to forsake, to reclaim Russia’s imperial prestige?

The Israel-Palestine conflict – with troubled history dating back millennia – entered a new bloody phase on 7 October 2023. Hamas’ indiscriminate murder and kidnapping of Israelis was responded to by an aggressive and indiscriminate attack on the Gaza strip and Palestinian people. The events seeded global outrage and division, fuelled by historical ties, intergenerational trauma, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. Within the span of a year, tens of thousands have been killed [6], the war has spread to Lebanon, and missiles have been exchanged with Iran, the principal benefactor of terrorism in the Middle East.

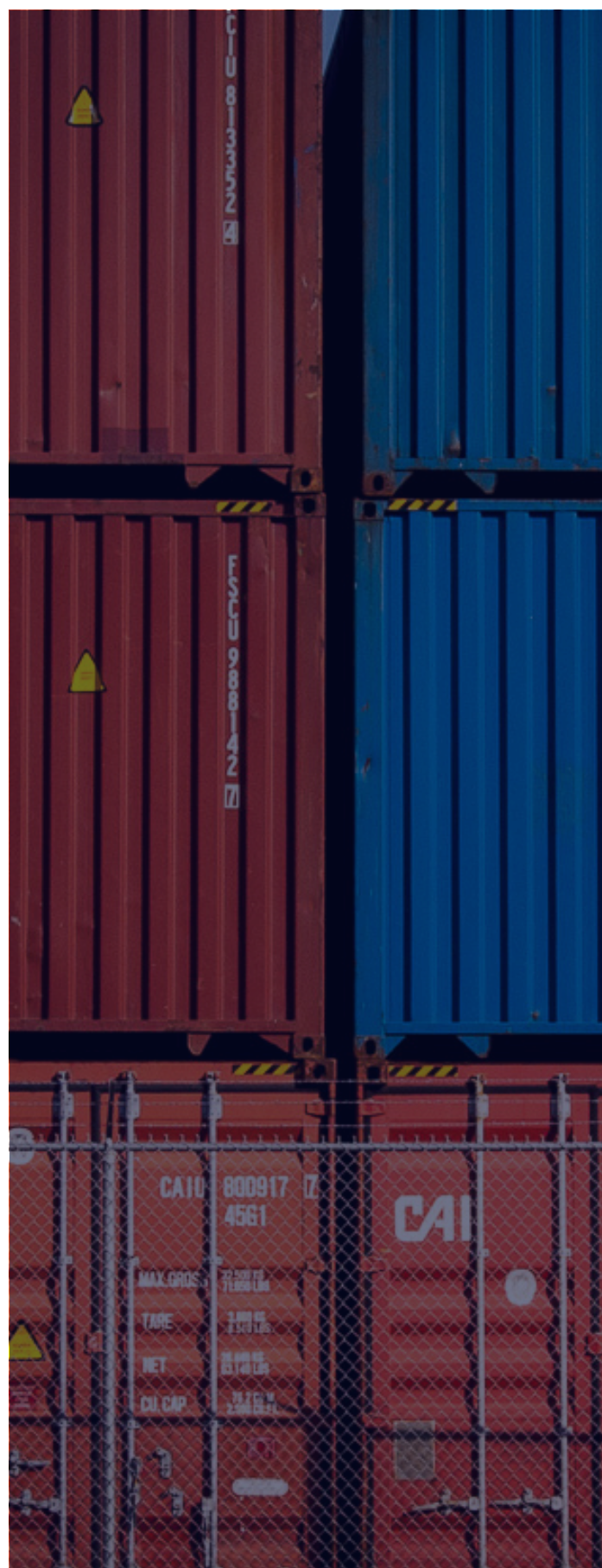
The speed with which these crises have unfolded sets a worrying precedent for future war - with over 56 current conflicts taking place globally [7] - especially given the ever-present prospect of nuclear catastrophe.



5 Handshakes, backstabs, and dollar signs

Economic statecraft and security have been important foreign policy themes in the last decade, including the use of foreign aid and investment, trade embargoes, sanctions, foreign investment screening, and data transfer contracts [8]. A continuously fracturing economic landscape has created new opportunities for state and non-state actors to navigate in between the fault lines and leverage new and subtler forms of power.

Economies – for good or for ill – since 2014 have become highly integrated both physically and digitally. Though briefly impacted by recent supply chain disruptions and set to a broader theme of reserved economic engagement, the overall pattern of interconnectedness has been sustained since 2014. While interdependency has proven lucrative, it has also come with significant costs. Investment into developing nations has at times resulted in high environmental, social or humanitarian externalities including modern slavery, child labour, and corruption.





Rising interdependence and trade complexity has also multiplied supply chain vulnerabilities, making it exponentially difficult for states and industries to assess risks or create resiliencies. Post-COVID-19, many states are increasingly seeking to reorganise their supply chain networks to be more localised and secure [9].

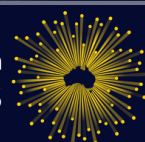
The international trade system is also facing increased competition within the Global South. China, as a rising regional power, is particularly active through its expansive, infrastructure-focused Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its development of new multilateral groupings, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS, and international investment banks like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. Some have viewed the conduct of these institutions and initiatives, particularly the BRI, as part of a strategy of 'debt-trap diplomacy', wherein the defaulting on debt over major infrastructure projects across much of the Global South becomes a point of leverage for influence. A broader range of international actors have also been willing to subvert or undermine existing trade institutions for their own benefit including revisionist powers like Russia, developing states such as Indonesia, and even established great powers like the United States.



6 Lessons from the Pandemic

This decade will be defined by COVID-19: by the choices, sacrifices, and losses it bore. It may also not be the last time humanity faces a global pandemic. As biodiversity loss and climate change accelerate, disease controlling ecosystem services will be impeded, environmental conditions will change radically, and wildlife habitats will degrade, thereby potentially inciting the emergence and proliferation of deadlier viruses and disease-carriers.

The COVID-19 pandemic was both a result of and contradiction to globalisation, where international, and in places such as Australia, internal state borders closed. Divides between the rich and poor were hideously exposed as the wealthy accessed vaccines months or years ahead of disadvantaged communities. As an island country, Australia reserved the advantages of time and spatial control. Our challenges are now to address lingering fears of 'the outsider' and to prepare for future pandemics, ensuring that no one is left behind.





Yet the structural conditions of inequality continue to widen across the globe, with the rich becoming richer – including the doubling of billionaire wealth – and the poor becoming ever poorer [10]. Decreased social and financial mobility is increasingly leading to dissatisfaction, dissolution, and fragmentation. Migration from the Global South reached a high in 2022 [11], driven in particular by conflict, persecution, climate- and weather-related disasters, as well as the decline of natural resources.

It is important to note that inequality stretches beyond income and wealth, and encapsulates gender, disability, age, race, religion, education, opportunity, and environmental conditions.



7 A decade of change

Though inequality continues to rise, the past decade has also been defined by growing global awareness and mobilisation around human rights and social justice, driven by various social and political movements and increasing interconnectedness.

Since 2014, the world has witnessed a continual rise in movements advocating for racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. In 2015, Australia voted to legalise same sex marriage, though many believe we are still far from equality. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement heightened global awareness as to the impact of systemic racism and police brutality. Similarly, the #MeToo movement has shed light on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and assault, leading to a broader dialogue about gender inequality and the power dynamics across the global economy.

These developments all recognise the innate importance of intersectionality: the understanding that different forms of





discrimination and oppression are interconnected and cannot be examined in isolation.

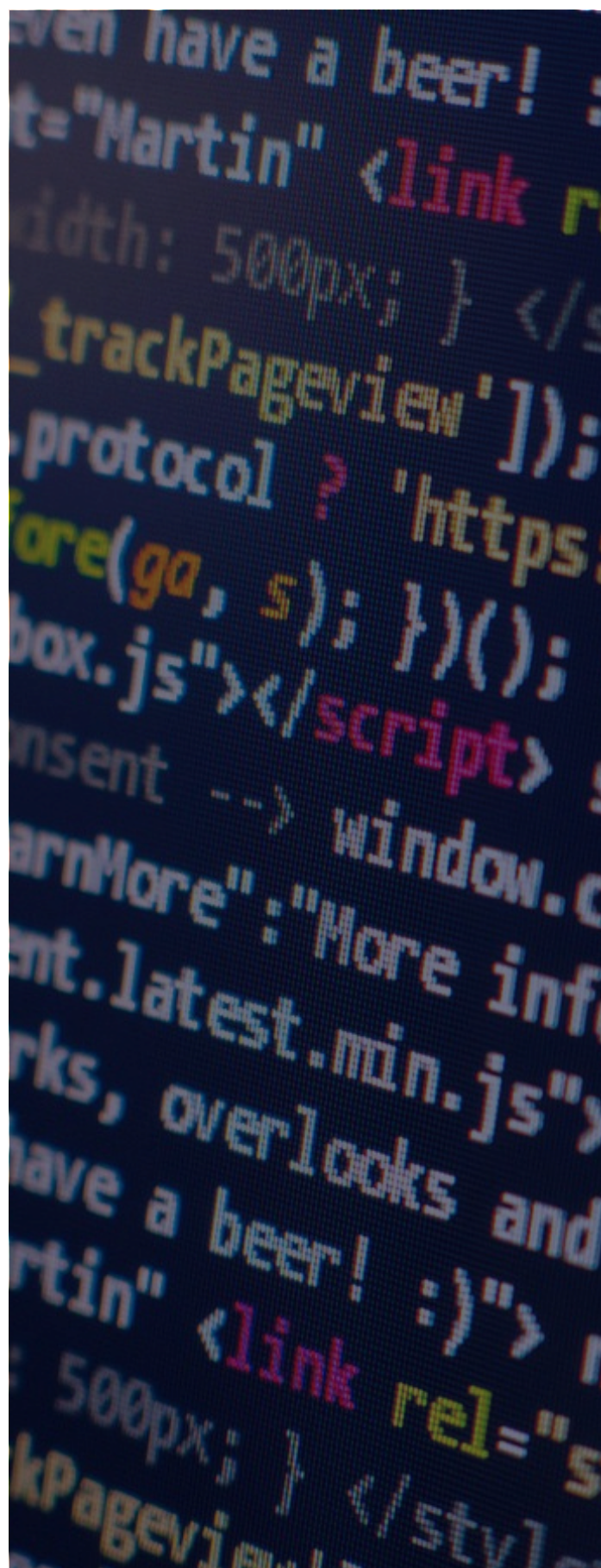
However, challenges persist. The international rise of authoritarian governments and reactionary sentiment has led to crackdowns on dissent, restrictions on free speech, and the erosion of democratic norms, including the rights for marginalised populations to express themselves. Additionally, efforts such as the Voice to Parliament, which would give Indigenous Australians constitutional recognition, have failed to see implementation. These issues ultimately rest upon deep-seated, institutionalised norms that will take time to confront and deconstruct. Increasing community engagement and technological accessibility can play a big role in this process, and can better support those who have been historically disadvantaged.

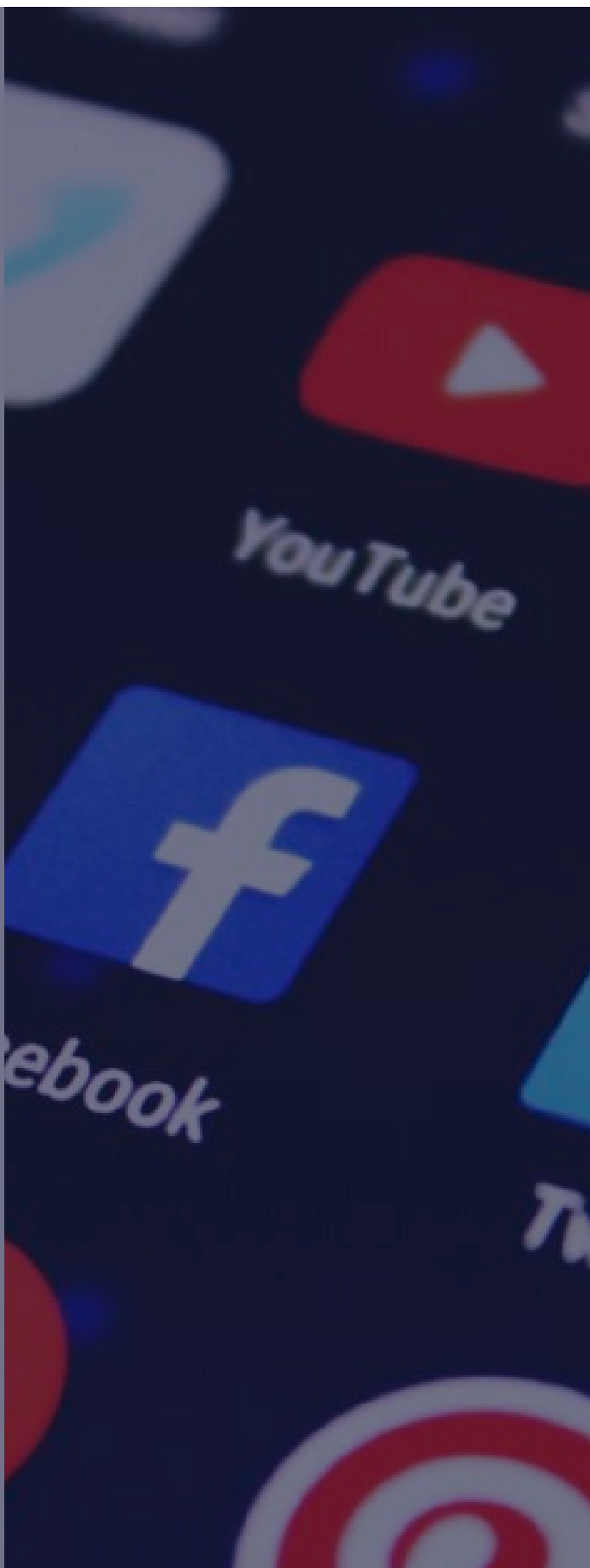


8 Ones and zeroes

No longer the exclusive domain of hooded hackers in dark rooms, offensive and defensive cyber-activity is now a core component of modern statecraft, and is increasingly the method of choice for criminals, terrorists, and activists. Since 2014, global internet connectivity has approximately doubled from 35 per cent to almost 70 per cent [12], generating billions of networked systems and data points susceptible to compromise. No state or non-state actor is immune to ransomware, data breaches, or, perhaps what is considered most insidious, attacks against critical infrastructure such as hospitals, telecommunications networks, and power grids. Hard to detect and even harder to attribute, offensive cyber-attacks are central to modern hybrid and grey-zone warfare by providing all actors engaged with effective camouflage and plausible deniability.

Social media, too, once heralded as the means by which the world would connect and democratise, has been effectively manipulated by big tech, political consultancies, and state actors to command





opinion and influence political outcomes. Curated algorithms decide the content viewed by billions, which continue to be co-opted by illiberal forces to undermine social cohesion and increase scepticism of democracy. Fake news, alternative facts, and mis- and disinformation have entered the common vernacular in the past ten years and continue to bear real influence on the health of democratic debate, the capacity for populations to experience a shared reality, and ultimately the institutions and actors to which we cede power.

The confluence of cyber and an expanded information terrain has also created new opportunities for espionage and intelligence-gathering, including the rise of open-source intelligence (OSINT). Private OSINT firms are increasingly engaged by militaries and intelligence organisations across the world, given their capabilities to derive information relating to sensitive nuclear weapons secrets [13], the outlines of military bases, [14] and even key tactical events relating to Russia's war in Ukraine [15] from publicly accessible social media, encrypted messaging, and geospatial data.

Making sense amid the chaos and confusion of cyberspace is increasingly becoming a central policy challenge, regardless of national or political hailing.

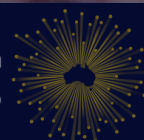


9 Triple planetary crisis

We are witnessing a global awakening to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, and of our interwovenness with nature. Ten years ago, these concerns seemed distant and were largely neglected. Now, the consequences of this ignorance have been made abundantly clear.

Biodiversity declined by an estimated 69 per cent since 1970 [16]. This encompasses the degradation of natural assets and ecosystem services such as fresh water, clean air, pollination and food production, and shade, as well as cultural and intrinsic losses of unique species and habitats. While the two issues are not synonymous, climate change is set to become the key driver of biodiversity loss by 2050.

Next year will mark 10 years of the Paris Agreement. 2023 was the hottest year on record, threatening its ambition of keeping warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius over a 20-year average. Climate change means extreme temperatures, unforgiving fires, flooding, drought cyclones, erosion, salinisation of fresh water sources, unpredictable conditions, crop loss, disease





proliferation, ecosystem collapse, insecurity, displacements, and conflict. The most exposed states have typically contributed the least to global warming, many of which reside within the Global South, including some of our neighbours in the Pacific. Wealthy countries, typically bearing the greatest responsibility for climate change, have failed to mobilise the promised USD\$100 billion sum annually to support climate action in developing countries.

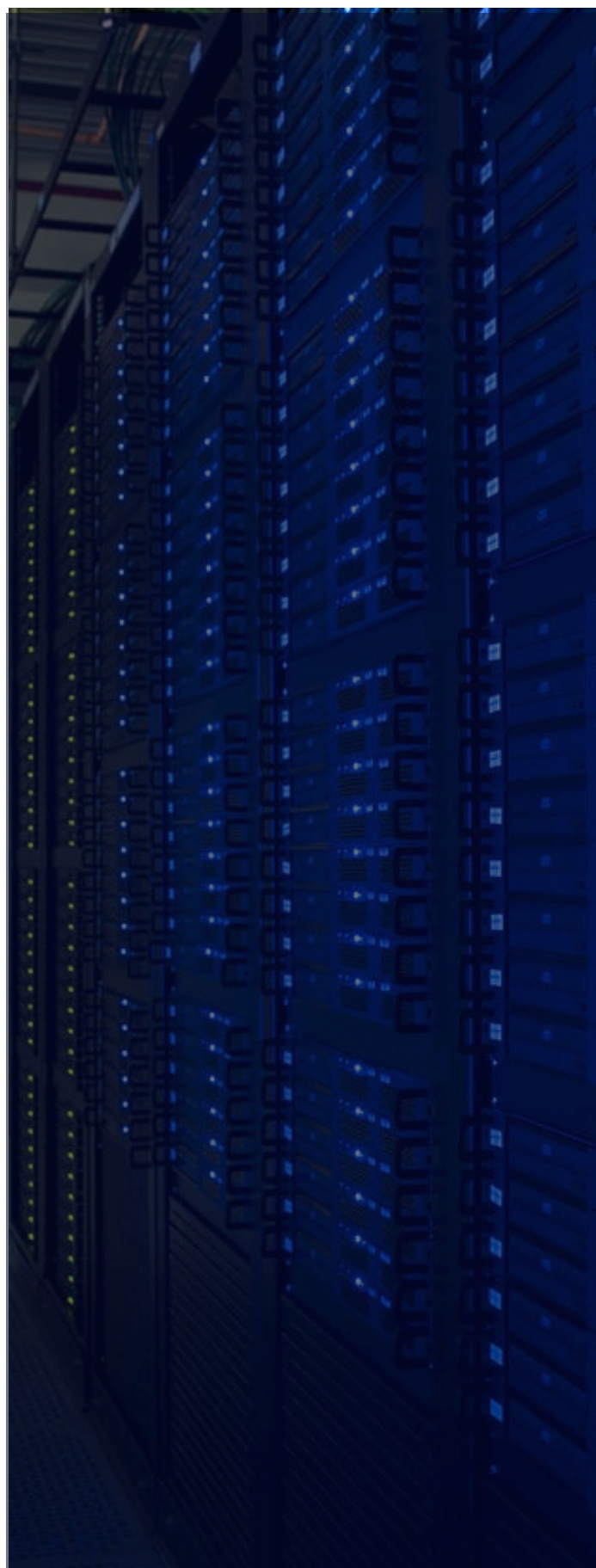
Seen as a laggard in climate action over the past decade, Australia's wealth, vast renewable capacity, and regional role poises it to lead. With a strong bid to co-host COP31, we may ask what type of Australia we will see heading into 2026 and what compromises it will be willing to make with Pacific Island co-hosts, many of which are unwavering in their ambitions for a region free of fossil fuels.




10 A brave new world

The advent of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing potentially poses the total destabilisation of the international affairs landscape. What were in 2014 limited, gimmicky chatbots are now in 2024 general-purpose large language models capable of emulating written prose and generating audio-visual content indistinguishable from that created by humans. Deepfakes and other synthetic content threaten to exacerbate the scourge of mis- and disinformation, whereas the development of sophisticated cyber and biological weapons, poses broader, more existential questions [17]. Certain forms of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), driven by AI, have also already seen tactical deployment in Ukraine [18].

The race to develop a functional quantum computer, too, could see potentially limitless developments in science, medicine, and manufacturing, allowing us to solve some of our most pressing civilisational challenges. At the same time, its misappropriation by state actors to





hypothetically break most forms of existing encryption renders no dataset completely secure.

Humanity's return to space also appears to be fraught with competition, and an arena in which our earthly problems will be brought to the final frontier. The new range of space actors that have emerged since 2014, such as India, Australia, and South Korea challenges the traditional power-sharing arrangement once held by the US, Russia, and China. Private capital is also flowing into space for telecommunications, exploration, resource extraction, and tourism. Whichever power gains space superiority may just decide geopolitics – terrestrial and extraterrestrial – for generations to come.

However, it is important to note that our technological path has not yet been charted, and that many futures could yet arise [19]. We should refrain from buying into techno-utopian fantasies just as we should reject the neo-luddite apathy that sees no benefit in technological progress. A sober view should be maintained by all actors engaged, so as to maximise technology's benefits whilst minimising its excesses.



CONCLUSION

The first ten years of YAIA's operations have been marked by a gradual – yet intensifying – shift from order to disorder in international affairs. A world once stable and familiar for many has become unrecognisable and uncertain. The story that was told at the beginning of the century: that endless economic growth and opportunity would unshackle the world from crisis, war, and tyranny, has proven painfully naïve. The rejection of this narrative by populations across the globe is loud and clear – its impacts to the marginalised, the environment, and the future prospect of life on this planet, on display for all to see.

What the next ten years looks like is anyone's guess. Some observers believe we're destined for a fractured, multipolar world characterised by competing regional influences and more frequent wars. Others hold out hope that we can chart a way through the chaos and return to normalcy.

Whichever of these futures manifest, YAIA will remain committed to parsing through the noise, and supporting the next generation of Australian leaders in contending with the many and varied challenges we collectively face. In a world of increasing political and academic polarisation, YAIA continues to provide a platform which catalyses exchanges and encourages the inclusive discussion of international affairs.

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Fiona Hurrey is an Editor at YAIA.

Henry Campbell is an Editor at YAIA.



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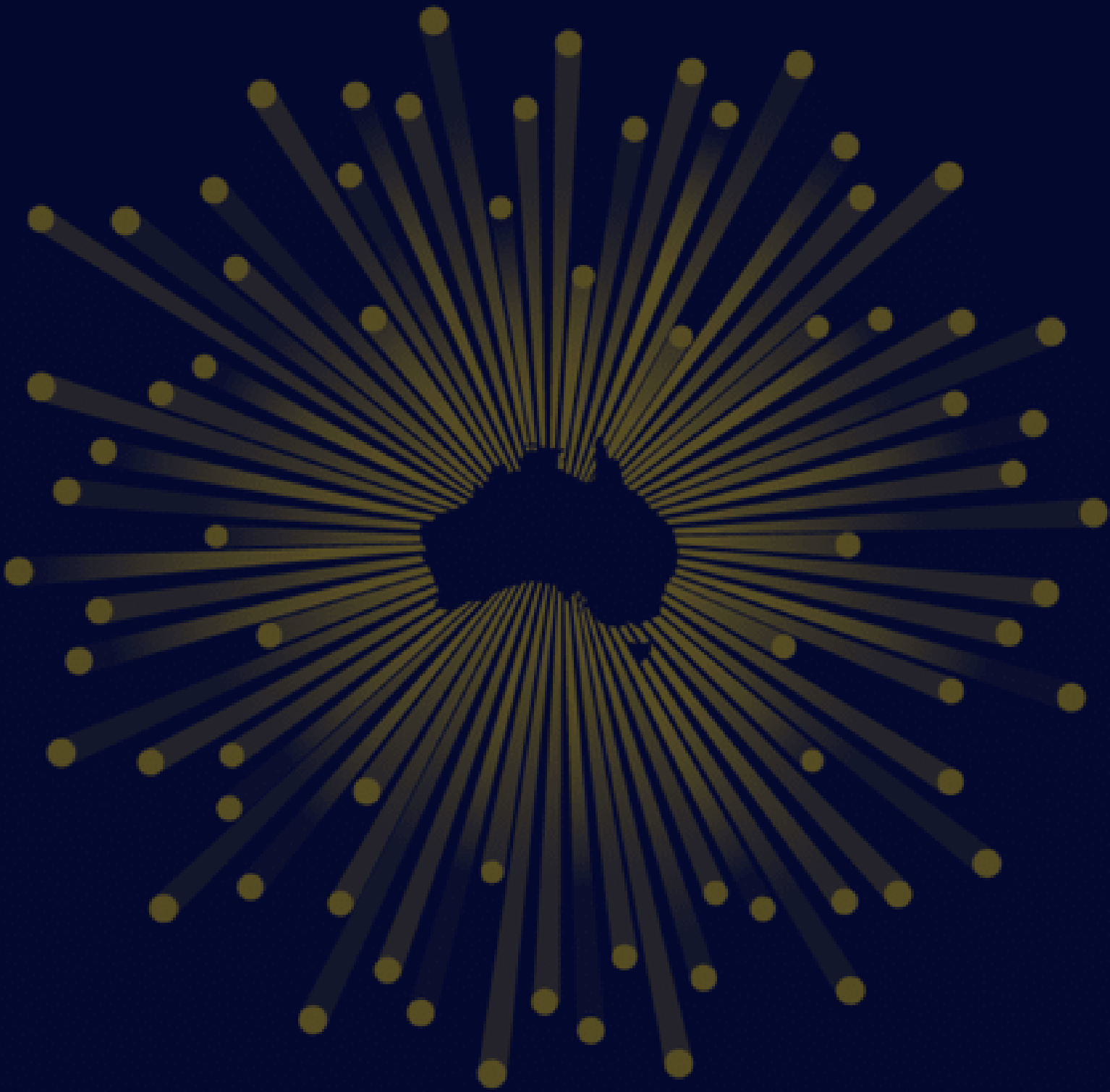
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