

An aerial photograph of Sydney Harbour, Australia. The Sydney Harbour Bridge is a prominent steel arch bridge spanning the water. To the left, the Sydney Opera House is visible with its distinctive white, sail-like roof. The water is a deep blue-green, and numerous boats are scattered across the harbour, leaving white wakes. The surrounding land is densely packed with buildings and greenery. The text 'LOWY INSTITUTE FEATURE' is overlaid in the top left corner.

LOWY
INSTITUTE
FEATURE

Beyond Fortress Australia

SEPTEMBER 2021

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

The Lowy Institute is an independent policy think tank. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia — economic, political and strategic — and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia's international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate
- promote discussion of Australia's role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----|---|-----------|
| 1. | Executive summary: Overcoming the Covid winner's curse <i>Hervé Lemahieu</i> | 1 |
| 2. | Fortress Australia is a smaller Australia <i>Michael Fullilove</i> | 4 |
| 3. | Singapore's pivot: Prospects beyond the fortress state <i>Emma Connors</i> | 7 |
| 4. | Foreign policy: China gains from Australia's interrupted diplomacy <i>Richard McGregor</i> | 10 |
| 5. | National economy: The arithmetic of isolation <i>John Edwards</i> | 13 |
| 6. | Pacific islands: Australia must lead a Pacific re-opening <i>Jonathan Pryke</i> | 16 |
| 7. | Southeast Asia: There is no substitute for showing up <i>Ben Bland</i> | 18 |
| 8. | Civil liberties: Covid response has weakened rights <i>Lydia Khalil</i> | 21 |
| 9. | Public opinion: Border politics are shifting <i>Natasha Kassam</i> | 24 |
| 10. | An expatriate's view: Alienation from Australia rankles in the vaccine era <i>Jenny Hayward-Jones</i> | 26 |
| 11. | Demographics: Surmounting Australia's Covid immigration pause <i>Sam Roggeveen</i> | 28 |
| 12. | Open borders: Australia must change the way it measures Covid success <i>Alex Oliver</i> | 31 |

INTRODUCTION

Hervé Lemahieu

The reality of living in a pandemic has dawned on Australia. Covid cases at the time of writing are high and still climbing. The virus is here to stay. Equally clear is that ring-fencing the country from the world — the ‘Fortress Australia’ policy — is no longer viable.

A pivot in Australia’s Covid public health response from de facto elimination to vaccination and adaptation creates the conditions to begin addressing the consequences of more than 18 months of unprecedented isolation.

The strategic and foreign policy implications of Australia’s border policies are an important, if often overlooked, dimension of the Covid debate. This series of essays by Lowy Institute experts explores the broader policy trade-offs of Fortress Australia, and the ways forward.

The views expressed in this feature are entirely the authors’ own and not those of the Lowy Institute.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: OVERCOMING THE COVID WINNER'S CURSE

Hervé Lemahieu

Border policies that were necessary and tolerable in the short term have become unsustainable and damaging to the national interest in the long term.

The reality of living in a pandemic has dawned on Australia. Covid cases at the time of writing are high and still climbing. The virus is here to stay. Equally clear is that ring-fencing the country from the world — the 'Fortress Australia' policy — is no longer viable.

Australia closed its international border on 20 March 2020 in response to the spread of the novel coronavirus. It has remained shut, in both directions, ever since. Borders served as the primary line of defence against the pandemic and enabled a zero-tolerance approach to Covid at home.

The strategy bought us critical time and saved countless lives as other countries suffered mass Covid casualties. But the idea that life in Australia could carry on with a pre-Covid sense of normalcy was an illusion. The gilded cage of safety was irreversibly compromised with the arrival of the highly contagious Delta variant on our shores in June 2021.

The Delta variant is not the only factor that has made Australia's isolation untenable. Border policies that were necessary and tolerable in the short term have become unsustainable and damaging to the national interest in the long term. Canberra appears to have signalled as much by announcing measures in early September that would accelerate the phased resumption of international travel.

A pivot in Australia's Covid public health response from de facto elimination to vaccination and adaptation will enable us to begin addressing the consequences of more than 18 months of unprecedented isolation.

This series of essays by Lowy Institute experts explores the broader policy trade-offs and costs of Fortress Australia, and the ways forward. The Institute has no house position on the handling of the pandemic, or indeed any other issue. The authors of these essays write in their own names. They are not public health experts. But they are knowledgeable about Australia's relationship with the world — an issue that has not received sufficient attention in the national debate on Covid policies.

The damage done

Australia has, in some respects, fallen victim to the Covid ‘winner’s curse’ — with pronounced effects in areas far beyond public health.

In his opening essay, **Michael Fullilove** warns that a long-term retreat from the world runs counter to Australia’s history and its interests. **Richard McGregor** observes that our lengthy closure of the border has left Australia sharply off the pace in regional diplomacy, precisely when Beijing has put its shoulder to the wheel.

An overseas mission by Foreign Minister Senator Marise Payne and Defence Minister Peter Dutton to Indonesia, India, South Korea, and the United States in early September may herald a new approach, according to **Ben Bland**. But efforts to deepen ties with key strategic partners will require more than high-level diplomacy.

Australia’s diplomats have worked hard to provide Covid-related assistance to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Without people-to-people links, however, “the connective tissue of Australia’s relationships with its neighbourhood” will continue to atrophy.

In the Pacific, Australia’s border closures have insulated entire countries from the virus. But if travel policy settings are not adjusted, **Jonathan Pryke** warns that Canberra will have to step in to keep Pacific economies from collapsing.

By contrast, the costs to Australia’s economy have so far been limited, as **John Edwards** points out. But they are set to grow, particularly in the university sector, as the long-term economic burden of isolation starts to outweigh the benefits.

Our isolation also poses risks to our demographics. **Sam Roggeveen** writes that Australia’s security, prosperity, and influence are linked inextricably to the size and growth of our population, which depends on immigration.

An intangible, but no less important, added cost of Australia’s Covid strategy has been the conspicuous absence of debate on the balance between civil liberties and public health measures. This is detrimental to democracy, warns **Lydia Khalil**.

The way forward

Australia must now arrive at a new ‘Covid normal’ — not by choice, but by necessity. The two largest states have conceded that zero-Covid is no longer a realistic goal. Prime Minister Scott Morrison signalled his

Australia must now arrive at a new ‘Covid normal’ — not by choice, but by necessity.

Managing the risk of illness and death must continue to be an overriding priority. But the dismal binary of being isolated and protected, or open and exposed, no longer describes our predicament.

shift in policy thinking by telling the Parliament, “We cannot live in the cave forever.” Isolation may have given Australia the gift of time, but the blunt tool of border-based policy also created complacency, writes **Alex Oliver**.

Australia can learn from other countries, such as Singapore, as it seeks to steer a sustainable course through the pandemic. The city-state has taken an ambitious ‘middle approach’ to re-opening, writes **Emma Connors**, which acknowledges that for a globally connected island nation there is no real alternative.

By contrast, a zero-tolerance approach to borders has been electoral gold in Australia. But as **Natasha Kassam** notes, attitudes are changing as advanced economies re-open and Australia’s isolation looks more conspicuous.

The Australian government currently targets a vaccination rate that will permit a phased re-opening starting as early as later this year.

Many Australian expatriates, including **Jenny Hayward-Jones**, understood that the denial of their right to freely re-enter Australia protected lives at home. But in the era of mass vaccination, their sense of alienation is growing.

Smarter, more compassionate conditions of travel for fully vaccinated expatriates, foreign residents, and long-term visitors would be in Australia’s immediate interest. Beyond 2022, Australia should follow Canada’s example of boosting medium-term immigration targets to offset the Covid shortfall.

All the while, the balance between re-opening and public health will remain precarious. Evidence suggests that Covid variants will circulate globally for years to come. Managing the risk of illness and death must continue to be an overriding priority. But the dismal binary of being isolated and protected, or open and exposed, no longer describes our predicament.

Charting a more considered course, at a time of great uncertainty, will not be easy. It will require agility and determination as we adjust to Covid as an endemic disease. But it must be done, if we hope to remain not only a world leader in our pandemic response, but an influential player in a contested region.

Hervé Lemahieu is Director of Research at the Lowy Institute.

FORTRESS AUSTRALIA IS A SMALLER AUSTRALIA

Michael Fullilove

In the beginning, Australia handled Covid very well.

Being an island was an advantage. We were able to pull up the drawbridge more easily than most.

But our success was not all down to good fortune. Canberra was quick to act. In short order, the government banned visitors from mainland China, introduced a mandatory two-week quarantine for all travellers, and closed the borders to nearly all non-residents and non-citizens. Australia declared Covid a national pandemic a fortnight before the WHO did so. Generous Commonwealth expenditures cushioned the blow to the economy.

Politicians and officials were conscientious and our universal healthcare system was critical. Importantly, the Australian people were calm, engaged, and pragmatic.

The results, measured in the ultimate metric of lives saved, were excellent.

But if the virus flattered Australia in 2020, it doesn't flatter us so much in 2021. It shows Australia in a somewhat different light.

As other developed countries re-open, Australia — an open-minded nation of immigrants and travellers, with a long-held belief in globalisation — remains closed to the world.

Both the acquisition and the early rollout of vaccines were flawed. And somehow Australians, known for being adventurous and laconic, allowed ourselves to be spooked by extremely rare vaccine side-effects that other comparable countries have taken in their stride. We put our vaccine brand preferences above the national welfare. Usually a curious and intrepid people, we became hesitant and fearful.

As other developed countries re-open, Australia — an open-minded nation of immigrants and travellers, with a long-held belief in globalisation — remains closed to the world.

The burden of Australia's Covid response has been borne most heavily by our expatriates and our immigrants.

National unity curdled into interstate rivalry. State loyalties re-emerged — along with state borders.

We also became insular. In any crisis, people tend to look inwards. But this turn was particularly pronounced in Australia. We forgot that Australian security and prosperity depends on engagement with the world.

The risk is that when Covid recedes, it leaves behind a smaller Australia.

For most of our history, Australians have looked outwards, not inwards. We have always regarded ourselves as a country with global interests. You see this in the remarkable diversity of Australia's military deployments: from the Boer War to the Boxer Rebellion; from the Dardanelles to the Western Front; from Greece to Malaya; from Vietnam and East Timor to Afghanistan and Iraq.

You see it in the consistent public support for allying with the great global power of the day, first the United Kingdom and then the United States — and the concerted drive since the 1970s to engage with Asia. You see it in our instinct to join multilateral institutions, like the United Nations, and to help create them, as we did with APEC and the G20.

You see it in the foreign investment that has driven Australia's growth since white settlement, and the large immigration programs of recent decades.

But now consider the changes that have taken place in the Covid era.

Our international border has been closed for 18 months. Consider what this means for the one in two Australians who were either born overseas or had at least one parent born abroad, as well as the Australians currently living abroad: the births, marriages, and funerals missed, the last goodbyes forsaken. Think of the business opportunities missed, the fortunes not made, the foreign investment not won, the degrees not earned, the friendships not made.

Disruption is inevitable in a global pandemic, and short-term border restrictions are a useful policy tool. But locking ourselves off from the world for so long is undesirable and unnecessary.

The burden of Australia's Covid response has been borne most heavily by our expatriates and our immigrants.

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

Australia has always had a large diaspora, out there conquering the world. But the debate about Australians abroad has soured.

Australia has severely restricted the rights of its people to both leave and return to the country. Tens of thousands of Australians remain stranded overseas. And there has been a small-minded and mean tone to the public discussion about our expats.

We also seem to have forgotten the advantages of immigration. Properly managed, immigration is nation-building. It grows our economy; it makes us more demographically vigorous; it thickens our connections to the countries around us; it brings in imagination and ambition. The qualities of the immigrant are highly correlated to the qualities of the entrepreneur.

Covid has temporarily frozen inward migration. This demographic shock will have implications for both our population and economy for decades – and yet we rarely hear public discussion about the need to kickstart immigration again.

It seems likely that in coming months, parts of Fortress Australia will be dismantled. Perhaps the border will re-open and muscle memory will kick in. I hope we will resume our practice of finding our security and prosperity in the world – not from the world. But we need to be careful that we don't get caught in a rut, complacent and happy with the Covid quo. We must not take Australia in a direction that is contrary to our interests and foreign to our historical experience.

We don't want Australia to be a little nation, anxious about the world and disposed to erect barriers against it. It is better to be larger – a big, confident country, vigilant in relation to viruses and other threats, but self-assured enough to keep risks in perspective.

Australians are now getting vaccinated in ever greater numbers. We need to roll up our sleeves, get our jabs, open up our country as safely as possible, and rejoin the world.

At our best, Australians are adventurers, with a large conception of Australia's role in the world. Fortress Australia is a smaller Australia.

Dr Michael Fullilove AM is the Executive Director of the Lowy Institute.

We must not take Australia in a direction that is contrary to our interests and foreign to our historical experience.

SINGAPORE'S PIVOT: PROSPECTS BEYOND THE FORTRESS STATE

Emma Connors

Singapore has carefully calibrated all Covid-related restrictions, including border controls.

In the early, panicked days of the Covid pandemic, Singapore and Australia were in lock-step when it came to border closures. Australia put a stop to international departures and barred entry to non-citizens on 20 March 2020. Four days later, Singapore did the same. Both were hard-line.

Singapore, more dependent on foreign labour than Australia, began adjusting its settings last year to allow some non-leisure travel. Australia managed a bubble with New Zealand, but not for long. In recent months, the two countries have veered further apart. Singapore is opening up via a series of meticulously planned manoeuvres in what the government describes as “the preparatory stage of re-opening”. The temperature screening stations that for the past 18 months have stood guard at every public entry point across the island have been removed. All going well, this will be followed by two transition stages. The end goal is a Covid-resilient nation, one in which life is not the same as it was in 2019, but close.

Singapore has carefully calibrated all Covid-related restrictions, including border controls. A few countries, including India and Bangladesh, are judged to be such high risk that no travel from these countries is allowed. Most nations fall somewhere in between this and the gold, no-quarantine-necessary standard awarded to most of mainland China, Taiwan, and New Zealand. Travellers from Germany, for instance, can now apply for a Vaccinated Travel Pass to board dedicated quarantine-exempt flights to Singapore.

In late August 2021, key ministers in Singapore’s People’s Action Party government, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, warned the city-state of the dangers of “turning inwards”. As the country emerges, blinking from the pandemic, its citizens are being told to get back on the horse. Since independence 56 years ago, Singapore, a tiny nation with no natural resources, has had to fight hard for its prosperity. Now it is game on again — but careful as she goes.

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

Singapore has rejected both the zero-Covid and borders-sealed approach favoured by China as well as the near-total lifting of restrictions that has occurred in the United Kingdom. Rather, it has taken what the government describes as a “middle approach”. The Delta variant has necessitated a conservative approach, with regular policy adjustments, as the country transitions to living with Covid.

Calls to open up Australia are coming from across the political spectrum. The leader of Australia’s most populated state, New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian, has repeatedly declared zero-Covid is not a realistic goal. In recent weeks, Victorian Premier Dan Andrews has come around to this view and Prime Minister Scott Morrison has also joined the chorus, telling Parliament, “We cannot live in the cave forever.” As we wait for the rest of the country to get on board, the Singapore model offers some clues on how 2022 could unfold.

By then, the city-state hopes to be treating Covid as an endemic disease. It has carefully mapped out how this will work with rules covering everything from restaurant dining numbers to vaccination travel lanes.

Of course, the key differentiator between the two nations is vaccination rates. Once Australia can get closer to where Singapore is now (where approximately 80 per cent of the total population is fully vaccinated), the Morrison government has flagged it will adjust its thinking.

Like Singapore, Australia cannot afford to keep its borders closed. Education and tourism industries have been decimated. Other sectors of the economy are in desperate need of the skilled migrants that have long plugged gaps and brought new thinking and ideas. The stock of imported entrepreneurial talent that has done so much to power growth in recent decades has diminished.

Australia’s reputation has also taken a beating. Former diplomats say our soft power has diminished and analysts refer to second-order effects. Nearly everyone outside the country agrees Fortress Australia is damaging the country’s standing.

Australians are used to being warmly welcomed around the globe. We would never have admitted it, of course, but Australians overseas were used to being envied. People’s faces tended to light up when they found out where you hailed from. It was a great icebreaker as they told you how they dreamed of going there, or how their uncle lived there, or why their child was studying there.

Singapore has rejected both the zero-Covid and borders-sealed approach favoured by China as well as the near-total lifting of restrictions that has occurred in the United Kingdom.

Expats are having very different conversations now, and often they are quite confronting. “What has gone wrong in your country?” asked a Singaporean acquaintance when I bumped into her in the supermarket. “It’s so sad.”

A German friend was more pointed. “No one likes Germans,” he told me cheerfully. “But everyone used to like Australians. Wherever you went in the world, you’d meet an Aussie, their sense of humour travelled well and far. But now ... it seems like a different country. It’s one that’s hard to like.”

In March 2020, closing borders made a lot of sense. As vaccination rates increase, that is no longer the case. Singapore’s “middle approach” to opening up is one way of managing the risks. The Lee government’s relentless messaging on the need to do so provides another lesson; the need to convince a nation, particularly an island nation, that there is no real alternative.

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong has said that “being open, staying open, it is existential for Singapore”. Surely the same holds true for Australia.

Emma Connors was Editor of The Interpreter at the Lowy Institute from 2015-2017. She is now The Australian Financial Review’s correspondent in Singapore.

FOREIGN POLICY: CHINA GAINS FROM AUSTRALIA'S INTERRUPTED DIPLOMACY

Richard McGregor

The politics of Covid in Australia swung decisively in late August 2021, from political leaders sheltering behind the safety of closed borders to campaigning to win the benefits of opening them up. As far as Australian diplomacy goes, the switch could not have come soon enough.

Australia's relatively successful early handling of Covid placed it in good company in Asia — the region which had both the best record of handling the pandemic and large pockets needing help in battling it. Similarly, in recent months, the Delta variant has spread in Australia and other countries, including China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, that had done well in suppressing the virus.

The obvious diplomatic lesson, then, both in the early successes and more recent stumbles, might be to build on that legacy with alacrity. Finally, that appears to be happening.

Canberra's lengthy fixation on closed borders left Australia sharply off the pace in regional diplomacy, precisely at a moment when rivals like Beijing have had all shoulders to the wheel.

The federal government, with the bellicose support of most state premiers, until recently saw closed borders as a winning political strategy. But it was a policy with countless detrimental knock-on effects for Australian foreign policy.

A caveat to these criticisms before I expand on them.

Political leaders of all stripes have had to take monumental, life-changing decisions without a road map, and often on the run during the pandemic. Equally, the balance between opening up and public health is precarious. The spread of the Delta strain is evidence of that.

It is also true that Scott Morrison's government has worked hard in the Pacific, with nations such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji, to provide

Political leaders of all stripes have had to take monumental, life-changing decisions without a road map, and often on the run during the pandemic

Diplomatically, a bold prime minister and cabinet could have tried to restart diplomatic travel earlier, both in going overseas themselves, and in bringing foreign dignitaries into Australia

vaccines and the means to deliver them. But after more than a year of managing the pandemic, Australia should have developed substantial muscle memory, both in managing outbreaks at home and creative ways to re-open to the world.

Sadly, for a country with a lengthy history of migration and which proudly proclaims itself as a “trading nation”, the policies all went in the opposite direction.

The first instinct was to keep the borders closed, with indifference bordering hostility to foreign students, workers, and tourists, let alone a robust reboot of regional diplomacy. Even after millions of people around the world had been vaccinated, strategies to get them into the country, perhaps with shorter and safer quarantines, barely featured in the government’s calculations.

Diplomatically, a bold prime minister and cabinet could have tried to restart diplomatic travel earlier, both in going overseas themselves, and in bringing foreign dignitaries into Australia. After all, as the government keeps (rightly) telling the citizenry every day, Australia is moving into a period of prolonged strategic instability and competition with the rise of China.

If Mr Morrison can make a quick trip for Father’s Day from Canberra to Sydney and back without quarantine, then surely the same protocols can be applied for short visits overseas.

The government, however, did not bother making a concerted case for leaders travelling overseas, with only a handful of exceptions and predictable results. Instead, the inflexibility of border controls meant that even the prime minister had two weeks’ quarantine on returning home from overseas, because to do anything else would open him up to charges of hypocrisy.

There was a different way of doing things, as China showed. Beijing’s top diplomats have undertaken a manic travel schedule, precisely to take advantage of the fact that Western countries’ diplomacy has been interrupted. Between February 2020 and mid-2021, for example, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited and hosted a number of ministers from around the world, and in August his ministry flew Taliban leaders into the country for a meeting in Tianjin.

Beijing displayed similar initiative through the region, including in relation to the frontline state of Papua New Guinea. The country’s

foreign minister, Soroi Eoe, has visited China this year. Surely it would not have been beyond Foreign Minister Marise Payne to fly to Port Moresby, or for Australia to host Eoe, or other ministers, in Cairns, going to and from the airport in a Covid-safe bubble?

Yes, some business has been done through virtual meetings, but face-to-face meetings are more important.

As a statement of its priorities, Australia focused on the US relationship under a new president, tightened strategic relations with Japan and India, secured a UK trade deal, and consolidated closer ties with Europe. These were all worthy and important objectives at a time when Beijing is pressuring Australia with trade sanctions. But it is hard to see why similar high-profile gestures, if not initiatives, could not have been taken close to home.

Along with our ministerial laxity in travelling into the region, the schedules of Cabinet members who did go overseas had a collective whiff of sheltering with the Anglosphere and its friends, just at the moment when we need to think beyond those traditional comforts.

Dan Tehan, the trade minister, thankfully bucked this trend with a regional trip in July.

Belatedly, other more senior ministers are following suit, with Payne and Defence Minister Peter Dutton undertaking a major overseas mission to Jakarta, New Delhi, Seoul, Washington and New York. This is overdue, but welcome.

On the home front, the shift to diplomatic opening up cannot come soon enough. Lockdowns are bad enough domestically. When applied to foreign policy, they are a disaster.

Richard McGregor is Senior Fellow for East Asia at the Lowy Institute.

Lockdowns are bad enough domestically. When applied to foreign policy, they are a disaster.

NATIONAL ECONOMY: THE ARITHMETIC OF ISOLATION

John Edwards

One mitigation to the economic impact of travel bans is that it takes time for them to hurt.

There is no doubt restrictions on travel across borders impose economic costs. The surprise in the Australian experience of the pandemic is how little the cost so far. The aggregate economic impact of border closures have so far been mitigated by the curtailment of Australian tourism abroad and by the very gradual effect of restrictions on new foreign students entering Australia. However, the longer the restrictions stay in place, the more the consequences will come into focus.

Eighteen months out from Australia's decision to close its international border, personal travel in and out of the country remains a tiny fraction of levels before the pandemic. Yet national production in the second quarter of this year was nearly one tenth higher than it had been a year earlier, and markedly above the pre-pandemic peak. Even with the setback of the Delta variant, national output in the third quarter may still be higher than it was a year earlier. The Delta strain lockdown has set back the jobs recovery, but likely only for as long as the new restrictions are needed. Once lifted, employment will bounce back — as it did in the months following the suppression of last year's outbreak. As the Reserve Bank persuasively argues, the Australian and global experience so far is that an economic rebound quickly follows the lifting of restrictions on work, shopping, and movement within the country.

Yet international travel restrictions have temporarily halted foreign tourism to Australia, formerly a big contributor to national income. By and large, new foreign students cannot yet enter the country — another big income source dented. Goods exports and imports are fine, but inward foreign investment and service exports are both down, and some of that may be due to the difficulty of international business travel. Net long-term migration boosted Australia's population by nearly a quarter of a million people in 2019. From the second half of last year, more people have left than arrived. So how can the Australian economy be doing well when it is so difficult for people to come or go?

One mitigation to the economic impact of travel bans is that it takes time for them to hurt. Foreign student numbers are a case in point.

According to government data, the number of foreign students in Australia was down by less than a fifth (to 525 982) comparing May this year to May last year. Much of the fall was in short-term English language courses. The decline in higher education was only 12 per cent. That is consistent with a sharp slowdown in new enrolments, while existing foreign students already in Australia continue their studies. Indeed, most have little choice. But the longer the ban stays in place, the larger the impact is likely to be as existing students graduate. Only now are specific student entry and quarantine programs being introduced, and so far only on a small scale. Until those programs are much larger, the number of enrolled foreign students will continue to dwindle.

Another economic mitigation is that while the entry of foreign tourists is down to a trickle, so too is the departure of Australian tourists abroad. In the year to March 2020, for example, 8.7 million foreigners temporarily visited Australia, while over 11 million Australians departed temporarily. In the following 12 months, there were only 66 000 foreign visitors, and only 141 000 Australians departed temporarily. Foreign tourists have not been spending foreign income in Australia, but Australians have also not been spending Australian income abroad. Since the latter normally far exceeds the former, the net effect of a travel ban is to increase Australia's national income.

And while net overseas migration turned negative in the second half of last year and there are shortages in some areas of the labour market, there are still plenty of Australians looking for jobs. In July 2021, there were 639 000 people looking for work, and another million or so who had jobs but would have preferred to work longer hours. Prolonged lockdowns in response to the Delta variant have no doubt increased those numbers. So far, most of the complaints of labour shortages have been in hospitality, farming, and other occupations where backpackers and other temporary residents — now excluded — are commonly employed. It will take some time for labour shortages to become evident in more rapidly rising wages and a lack of critical skills. Nonetheless, the longer Australia remains shut to migrants, the sooner the shortages will become apparent.

While the international travel restrictions impose some economic costs, they have also conferred economic benefits. Australia has unquestionably experienced fewer Covid infections and deaths because of them. But the longer travel restrictions remain, the more they will hurt. Australia has, for example, gained from a substantial immigration program that slows down population ageing, brings skills

The Australian government should seize more targeted opportunities to liberalise entry and exit before the considerable long-term costs of isolation outweigh the benefits.

in short supply, increases diversity and cultural openness, and strengthens connections with the global economy. The loss of these benefits will begin to reveal themselves over time.

The Australian government currently targets a vaccination rate that will permit a phased re-opening of the international border starting as early as 2021, allowing resumption of student arrivals and business travel, and later of migration and tourism through 2022. Meanwhile, the Australian government should seize more targeted opportunities to liberalise entry and exit before the considerable long-term costs of isolation outweigh the benefits. Like the initial stages of the vaccination program, the slow pace of approving protocols under which foreign student entry can resume in 2022 is a blot on the Australian government's otherwise successful handling of the pandemic.

John Edwards is a Senior Fellow at the Lowy Institute and an Adjunct Professor with the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy at Curtin University.

PACIFIC ISLANDS: AUSTRALIA MUST LEAD A PACIFIC RE-OPENING

Jonathan Pryke

Australia's closed borders have had a devastating impact on the Pacific. Tourism-dependent economies such as Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, and the Cook Islands have experienced eye-watering economic contractions. All Pacific economies have suffered from the soaring costs of imports and a loss of expatriate workers. Lowy Institute research has shown that without significant intervention, the Pacific will not return to its 2019 per capita GDP levels until 2028 — a lost decade of development.

As borders remain closed and the costs mount, the region will be dealing with the ramifications of the Covid crisis for decades to come. Beyond the economic toll, closed borders have separated families, blunted Australia's Pacific Step-Up efforts to enhance people-to-people links in the region, forced radical rethinking of — and greater demands on — our \$1.4 billion aid program, and made the distance between Australia and our closest neighbours feel greater than ever.

Yet it has all been necessary. The economic cost has bought many Pacific Island countries something very valuable — protection from the virus. For the better part of the past year, Pacific nations have dominated indices of countries that have remained completely Covid-free. Pacific nations were willing participants in these efforts. They reacted quickly by bunkering down and barring all international visitors, turning what is often perceived as a weakness — small size and isolation — into a strength. As Dame Meg Taylor noted to me last year, Pacific nations need no reminder of the risks of foreigners bringing disease to their lands. Smallpox, influenza, measles, scarlet fever. The Pacific has been decimated by them all at one time or another.

This calculus assumed that closed borders would only be a short-term strategy. By remaining Covid-free, the Pacific islands were to be first in line for quarantine-free travel, mooted as early as May last year. But new and persistent outbreaks of the Delta variant in Australia, the unchecked spread of Covid across Papua New Guinea, and a tenuously controlled outbreak in Fiji have turned this short-term calculus into an

Without significant intervention, the Pacific will not return to its 2019 per capita GDP levels until 2028 — a lost decade of development.

The ongoing criticism of AstraZeneca here in Australia, despite its remarkable efficacy, is making vaccination efforts in the Pacific even harder.

entrenched long-term one. Despite the goodwill in both Australia and New Zealand, travel to the Pacific remains severely restricted. Widespread vaccinations — on both sides, and likely as a condition of travel — seem now to be the only viable route forward. Fiji is showing the way for Pacific nations, and is ahead of Australia in vaccinating more than 95 per cent of its adult population with one jab, and more than 50 per cent with two, in a five-month period.

Australia is doing its part to ensure a steady flow of domestically produced AstraZeneca vaccines will fully meet the Pacific's needs, committing to providing 15 million doses by mid-2022. However, the ongoing criticism of AstraZeneca here in Australia, despite its remarkable efficacy, is making vaccination efforts in the Pacific even harder. For many Pacific nations, in particular Papua New Guinea where existing vaccine supplies are expiring before they can be administered, mass vaccination seems out of reach due to a combination of logistics challenges and misinformation.

If Australia's risk calculus does not change soon and our borders remain closed to the Pacific, then we will have to provide even more support to keep economies there from collapsing. A US\$3.5 billion multi-donor fund proposed by my colleagues Roland Rajah and Alexandre Dayant should be mobilised, in addition to the aid we already provide in the form of grants or loans. More of our aid will need to be shifted from existing priorities to social welfare schemes and budget support.

The strengthening of Pacific health systems, especially with respect to vaccination capacity, will be a critical focus. Australia should help bolster those systems with direct support — especially in administration and infrastructure. Pacific nations, and particularly those that are Covid-free, should remain at the front of the queue when Australia does get around to relaxing its border controls.

To date, Pacific nations have been patient. They know the health risks and want a re-opening led by Australia and New Zealand. But as the economic toll grows and vaccination rates rise, this patience will not persist. If Australia does not relax conditions for travel soon, there will no doubt be other partners enthusiastic and able to lead the re-opening of the Pacific to the world.

Jonathan Pryke is Director of the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute.

SOUTHEAST ASIA: THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR SHOWING UP

Ben Bland

Since the pandemic began, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has met her Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, face-to-face four times. Retno has also received or visited counterparts from the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, the European Union, Iran, Hungary, and United Arab Emirates, some on multiple occasions. But she had not met in person with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne until earlier in September, despite Indonesia being Australia's most important neighbour. Hopefully this long-overdue visit presages a new approach to our region.

For while other countries are intensifying their diplomatic ground games at a time of renewed geopolitical competition in Asia, Australia has been largely absent. With Canberra reluctant to give quarantine exemptions to visiting foreign officials, the onus has been on Australian ministers to get travelling. But they have been sparing in their overseas trips, concerned about the risks of catching Covid (despite their access to vaccines), the quarantine they have to complete when they return (albeit at home) and, presumably, the possible political blowback from taking to the skies when others cannot.

Although Australian ministers have been active on the telephone and in video conferences, there is no substitute for showing up, especially in Asia.

Australia's relationships with key Southeast Asian partners such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are probably the best they have been for many years. But these are not the seamless discussions of truly like-minded states and allies. To advance their relationships, Australia and its regional partners need more of the difficult conversations that can only be had face-to-face and behind closed doors by ministers, while aides share a joke as they wander the official corridors. From the crisis in Myanmar to the management of the pandemic and the planning for economic recovery, the region is facing many complex challenges that cannot be tackled on Zoom calls alone.

Australia and its regional partners need more of the difficult conversations that can only be had face-to-face and behind closed doors by ministers.

If stringent border restrictions endure, without carefully managed pathways to opening up, they will undermine the argument that Australia is a proactive part of the region.

It is not just high-level diplomacy that has suffered. Broader people-to-people links — the connective tissue of Australia’s relationships with its neighbourhood — will continue to be strained by closed borders. Foreign students who have paid good money to study in Australia but are blocked from entering are growing increasingly frustrated — as are the Asian diplomats advocating on their behalf. Educational exchanges such as the New Colombo Plan, which sends Australian undergraduates to study or participate in internships across Asia, could be on hold (or reduced to online-only activities) for years. And government efforts to turbo-charge the economic relationships with growth markets such as India, Indonesia, and Vietnam are likely to stutter unless investors can travel, look for opportunities, and connect in person.

When he addressed the Australian parliament just before the pandemic, Indonesian President Joko Widodo said that “true friends are people who stay with you during the good and the bad times”. If stringent border restrictions endure, without carefully managed pathways to opening up, they will undermine the argument that Australia is a proactive part of the region. Instead, Australia will give the impression that when trouble hits, the drawbridge goes up.

Australia’s deep connections with its neighbours in Southeast Asia have long been an important part of its contribution to the Five Eyes partnership with the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. But, despite being in the midst of far worse Covid crises, the United Kingdom and the United States have been more active visitors to the region in recent months, and they have progress to show for it. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab convinced the member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to make the United Kingdom their first new Dialogue Partner in 25 years. Lloyd Austin, the US Secretary of Defense, convinced mercurial Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte to restore a vital agreement governing the presence of US troops in his country.

Australian diplomats have worked hard to provide concrete support to the region, increasing Covid-related development assistance to Southeast Asia, promising to deliver millions of vaccine doses, and providing financial support to Indonesia. This help is appreciated, but it needs to be accompanied by more high-level diplomatic visits and a plan to resume other people-to-people connections.

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

The longer Australia remains cut off from its own backyard, the more it leaves the field open to its partners, who are to some degree competitors for influence, as well as rivals such as China. To capitalise on the progress of the pre-pandemic years, and realise Australia's role as an engaged Indo-Pacific nation, the government must find ways to reconnect with Asia in a safe and controlled manner.

Ben Bland is Director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Lowy Institute.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: COVID RESPONSE HAS WEAKENED RIGHTS

Lydia Khalil

Federal and state governments have made some questionable decisions for a liberal democracy.

Australia's decisive move to close its international borders, and its state governments' use of emergency powers to enact restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly have helped the country remain relatively unscathed in terms of deaths and severe illness from Covid. Even under current Delta variant daily caseloads of more than 1500 in early September 2021, Australia's Covid infections are still far below international averages. Yet behind this success lies a worrying erosion of Australians' civil liberties and human rights.

Australia's most important neighbour, Indonesia, and its closest ally, the United States, have been devastated by illness and death through either lack of resources, incompetence, or unwillingness to enact similarly strict measures on borders and restrictions on movement and association.

In comparison, Australia's early successes at suppressing the pandemic have given elected officials in Australia a wide berth to maintain the state of emergency powers which remove traditional checks on authority in the name of public health. Elected leaders discovered political popularity in their hard-line approaches. Because of the high confidence placed by Australians in their public health officials, these leaders have been quick to defer to public health advice without balancing that advice against considerations of civil liberties.

In so doing, federal and state governments have made some questionable decisions for a liberal democracy.

Australia has banned its own citizens from leaving the country without express permission. Using existing biosecurity legislation, Australia temporarily threatened to jail and fine its citizens for attempting to return home from India — a move that raised concerns from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It has left tens of thousands of its own citizens to languish overseas, unable to return home due to hotel quarantine caps. This is not only a violation of civil liberties, but an erosion of the rights of Australian citizenship.

At the state level, public health measures appear increasingly punitive — particularly in lower socioeconomic and minority communities. When Victoria locked down thousands of public housing residents in Melbourne in July 2020 with fewer than 24 hours' notice, the Victorian ombudsman found it to be in violation of the residents' human rights. She has gone on to identify thousands of other human rights breaches by public servants during the course of the pandemic. In Queensland, the state government recently prevented the parents of a premature newborn, both of whom had completed their quarantine, from visiting their baby despite a Covid-safe plan put in place by the hospital. Meanwhile, various snap state border closures have led to thousands of residents being locked out of their own state during the holiday travel season in 2021. These policies amount to some of the strictest public health measures in the democratic world.

In parallel, mass surveillance has been largely normalised. In Victoria and Western Australia, drones have been used to monitor social distancing. Mobile surveillance units with CCTV cameras have been deployed to “capture and deter breaches of Chief Health Officer directions”. There is little public notice or debate on such modes of surveillance. Police have not provided information on why or where they are deployed, nor how surveillance footage is being used.

The success of emergency powers in suppressing the pandemic, combined with a lack of regard for their impact on civil liberties, has allowed state governments to pursue legislation that would erode accountability. Last year, proposed Victorian legislation sought to remove the regular review of state of emergency declarations. While this draft legislation was retracted, states are renewing efforts to design new laws that would supersede temporary and reviewable state of emergency declarations, with few safeguards or mechanisms for accountability.

Yet in contrast to many of Australia's democratic peers, the preservation of civil liberties and concerns about government overreach have not been the subject of serious debate in this country. That the few voices opposing the restrictions under various states of emergency are often those of conspiracy theorists and “sovereign citizen” protestors does not help. In fact, Australia's reliance on lockdowns has fuelled conspiratorial narratives about an authoritarian takeover and energised extremist movements.

Failure to engage in a robust debate on the balance between civil liberties and public health will be detrimental to Australian democracy.

Failure to engage in a robust debate on the balance between civil liberties and public health will be detrimental to Australian democracy.

The risk in the wake of this crisis is that extraordinary measures become normalised and human rights standards are permanently eroded. Trust between citizens and the state, historically high in Australia, may also suffer and impact long-term governance trends, particularly as tolerance for lockdowns and punitive measures starts to wane.

Australia's ambassador to the United Nations recently told the UN Human Rights Council that "governments must ensure Covid-19 response measures comply with international human rights obligations". Australia should urgently look to its own performance on this measure.

Lydia Khalil is a Research Fellow in the West Asia Program at the Lowy Institute. She manages the Institute's partnership with the Global Network on Extremism and Technology.

PUBLIC OPINION: BORDER POLITICS ARE SHIFTING

Natasha Kassam

The closure of Australia's borders — from within and without — has been lauded as the price to pay for keeping Australians safe from the global pandemic. What do Australians think? Until very recently, the human costs of these decisions have been accepted as a matter of pragmatism, driven by a need to act decisively in the health emergency.

Public support for Australia's approach in the first phase of the pandemic was overwhelming. In the annual Lowy Institute Poll, fielded in March 2021, almost all Australians (95 per cent) said Australia had done a good job handling the pandemic. Even more (92 per cent) said Australia's Covid handling would have a positive influence on Australia's reputation in the world.

This is despite the struggles that Australian citizens abroad have faced returning home. In early September 2021, tens of thousands of Australians are still registered as wanting to repatriate from overseas. Despite this, more than half the population (59 per cent) said in March that the Australian government has done about the right amount in bringing Australians home from overseas. Only a third (33 per cent) said the government had not done enough.

In the other direction, Australian citizens have not been allowed to leave without special exemptions. These exemptions have been relatively rare: only eight per cent of applications as of August had been approved on compassionate grounds.

Polls have shown majority support — from around seven in ten Australians — for keeping the borders closed until at least mid-2022. For many Australians, vaccination is the condition on which the country should be re-opened. The Lowy Institute Poll showed that 41 per cent of Australians agreed that citizens should not be able to leave the country without applying for special exemptions. However, the same number said vaccinated citizens should be able to leave now, and a further 18 per cent said all Australians should be able to leave now, regardless of their vaccination status.

Both tough borders and a tough approach to the pandemic have been electoral gold — until now.

This change in sentiment has occurred as much of the developed world finds a new Covid-normal and Australia's isolation look more conspicuous.

Tough borders have always been good politics. In part, this plays on the anti-migration sentiment that exists within a minority of the country, and a bipartisan need to demonstrate national security credentials.

However, the slow start to the vaccination rollout in Australia, coupled with rolling lockdowns, has taken its toll on Australian sentiment. Further polling from Essential shows that positivity towards the federal government's handling of Covid has sharply declined by 34 points since March. In August, only 39 per cent of Australians said that the government's response was good, the lowest rating recorded since the question was first asked in March 2020, when international borders closed.

As well as growing concern about the government's handling of the pandemic, Australians are split as to how Covid has changed the country. A Pew poll shows that half of Australians say the country is more united than before the outbreak, while four in ten say the country is more divided.

The flux in state borders has also played a role in this divisiveness. Western Australia's Premier Mark McGowan said early in the pandemic, "We will be turning Western Australia into its own island, within an island — our own country." He received some of the highest approval ratings of any Australian politician and a landslide election victory in March.

Both tough borders and a tough approach to the pandemic have been electoral gold — until now. This change in sentiment has occurred as much of the developed world finds a new Covid-normal and Australia's isolation look more conspicuous. The Australian public can see that. YouGov polling in August found half the country wants restrictions to end when the 80 per cent vaccination target is reached. Only 16 per cent would still prefer for a return to zero-Covid.

Only four months ago, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told *The Daily Telegraph*, "We sit here as an island that's living like few countries in the world are at the moment. We have to be careful not to exchange that way of life for what everyone else has." These words have started to take on a very different meaning in an Australia where more than 11 million Australians are in hard lockdown.

Natasha Kassam is Director of the Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Program at the Lowy Institute.

AN EXPATRIATE'S VIEW: ALIENATION FROM AUSTRALIA RANKLES IN THE VACCINE ERA

Jenny Hayward-Jones

When the United Kingdom went into its first Covid lockdown on 23 March 2020, three days after Australia closed its international borders, my family was already in quarantine. My son had developed symptoms of Covid and, under the prevailing rules, we had to take him and my daughter out of school and our family had to stay inside our home for ten days. Earlier, in February, I had developed a severe cough, fever, and lost my sense of taste and smell — later known as the three key Covid symptoms. I called my doctor for a tele-consultation. She said, “There’s nothing to worry about. Unless you’ve been to northern Italy recently, there is no chance it’s coronavirus.” I live in rural southwest England but had recently been to London for a meeting at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, travelled on busy trains, and visited the National Gallery, coming into close contact with hundreds of people, unwittingly putting myself at risk. I will never know if I had Covid. At the time, there were fewer than 20 official cases in the United Kingdom.

As cases and deaths from Covid quickly escalated, and the Conservative government increasingly looked hapless in the face of the horrors of the pandemic, we considered whether it would be safer for us as a family to return to Australia to wait out the pandemic. We knew Australia had closed the borders to contain the pandemic, but had not appreciated until then that the caps imposed on international arrivals had locked out Australian citizens. We resigned ourselves to life in lockdown in the United Kingdom and sadly accepted the cancellation of flights to Sydney we had booked for August 2020 to see our family.

When the pandemic raged for us that year, our British family, friends, and colleagues looked enviously at Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island countries as a sort of Shangri-La — a corner of the world that had seemed to outsmart the virus. More than a year later, in early September 2021, 65 per cent of the total UK population has been fully vaccinated and almost all Covid restrictions have been removed. Now we look incredulously at Australia, where less than 35 per cent of the population has been fully vaccinated and lockdowns in several states

When the pandemic raged for us that year, our British family, friends, and colleagues looked enviously at Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island countries as a sort of Shangri-La.

Border closures have been a handy blunt instrument, but there are now smarter, more compassionate ways to manage the pandemic.

continue. While we eagerly accepted text message invitations from the National Health Service to get our jabs and, like thousands of other fully vaccinated Australians overseas, dreamed of rescheduling our trip to Sydney, the Australian government squandered its advantage in the battle against the virus.

The caps on international arrivals, the significant expense of inflated airfares, compulsory quarantine, and now a requirement that Australians normally resident overseas who return to visit family are required to seek an exemption from a ban on departing Australia in order to return home means that hundreds of thousands of Australians, many in much greater need than my family, are prevented from seeing their families until 80 per cent of the Australian population has been fully vaccinated, according to the federal government's pandemic exit plan.

The Morrison government's decision to deny up to one million Australians who live and work overseas their privilege as citizens to "re-enter Australia freely" served to protect lives in Australia in the pre-vaccination era. Many Australians overseas could understand that sacrificing this privilege was for the greater good. But the sense of alienation this policy wrought endures and rankles in the mass vaccination era. The needs of Australians overseas are unlikely ever to be factored into government decision-making, but the needs of their families in Australia, who pay taxes and vote, should be. Border closures have been a handy blunt instrument, but there are now smarter, more compassionate ways to manage the pandemic.

Jenny Hayward-Jones is a Nonresident Fellow in the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute.

DEMOGRAPHICS: SURMOUNTING AUSTRALIA'S COVID IMMIGRATION PAUSE

Sam Roggeveen

Australia has long been one of the wealthiest countries in Asia and the Pacific, which has allowed our small population to gain security and influence. But now that Asia is catching up economically, population size is translating into vastly increased national power. China is now among the most powerful nations in the world, India will soon join it, and Indonesia is the acknowledged leader of Southeast Asia.

Australia's security, prosperity, and influence are now indelibly tied to the size of our population. Yet the Australian government's response to Covid has abruptly stopped the nation's population growth, 60 per cent of which is derived from overseas migration. The 2021 Intergenerational Report predicts net overseas migration will be negative from 2020 to 2022 as more people leave the country than enter it, and notes that population growth in 2020–21 fell to its lowest annual rate (0.1 per cent) for over a century.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has said Australia will eventually return to pre-Covid immigration levels, and the Intergenerational Report forecasts that by 2023–24, the population growth rate will largely return to the norm of the last 40 years. But to recover the lost population growth from border closures during the pandemic will require more than that. Canada has set a good example; in November 2020 it announced a program that will boost medium-term immigration targets to offset a Covid shortfall. There is no sign of an equivalent policy in Australia. In fact, the danger is that, because closing the borders has worked so well as a response to the pandemic and has synched so neatly with Australia's post-9/11 border control fixation, governments will be tempted to drag out the return to high immigration levels and thus population growth. This would be a mistake.

Australia must be able to look after its own security and help our neighbours without sacrificing major domestic priorities or having to rely so much on America. That means a bigger Australia, and we can only do that through higher immigration. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd recently said Australia should aim for a population of 50 million

Canada has set a good example; in November 2020 it announced a program that will boost medium-term immigration targets to offset a Covid shortfall.

To continue to improve our living standards, and to support the economic, defence, and foreign policy apparatus needed for our security in a more contested Asia, we must grow even faster.

in the second half of the century. While acknowledging the political difficulty of the task, Rudd wrote that “a Big Australia is also about the size and scope of our national imagination”.

He is right, but that imaginative leap — the ability to see an Australia almost twice as populous as it is today — just got even harder thanks to Covid, because the effect of closing Australia to the world has not been so bad, at least economically. Covid is teaching us that zero population growth can be comfortable, even though negative overseas migration leads to relative population decline when measured against our neighbours.

We will probably return to our pre-Covid immigration rates eventually and without much fuss because the major-party consensus on high immigration levels remains firm. The implicit bargain between Labor and the Coalition has long been to support some of the highest immigration rates among advanced economies, but to do it quietly, thereby avoiding public debate and scrutiny. If that bargain holds, the Intergenerational Report projects Australia will get to 39 million by 2060–61.

The real challenge will be to make the case for even higher immigration rates. To continue to improve our living standards, and to support the economic, defence, and foreign policy apparatus needed for our security in a more contested Asia, we must grow even faster. Critics will say this stretches our capacity to house, employ, educate, and integrate new Australians, but there is no nation better at this than Australia. Our ability to peacefully absorb large numbers of new immigrants from around the world while growing the economy is Australia’s competitive advantage.

Covid ought to be a motivation to stretch our population goals towards 50 million rather than shrink our horizons, because it shows that our region needs a large and ambitious Australia that can play a decisive part in mitigating not just health emergencies, but diplomatic disputes and security crises.

A larger and more powerful Australia does not mean a more aggressive Australia. The point is not to project far-reaching military power into Asia as we once did when Australia was the only rich nation in our neighbourhood, but to persuade our neighbours that we are a powerful and useful partner. One of the benefits of higher immigration is that we accelerate our demographic integration with Asia as we take more migrants from the region. We ought to make a special effort with

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

Indonesia to create a diaspora here that symbolises the centrality of that relationship.

A bigger Australia will help the nation declare to Asia that we are a confident, welcoming country. It would help set a new narrative in Asia about who we are, and the role we want to play in tackling major problems and seeking peace and sustainability. Beyond our region, a higher migration target can be Australia's gift to humanity. The United Nations predicts that there will be 9.7 billion people on the planet by 2050. If more of those people are Australians, the world will be a better place, and so will Australia.

Sam Roggeveen is Director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute.

OPEN BORDERS: AUSTRALIA MUST CHANGE THE WAY IT MEASURES COVID SUCCESS

Alex Oliver

The result was a country unprepared for the attack of an infectious variant resistant to the clumsy tool of border-based policy.

Until several months ago, Australia's handling of Covid was the envy of the developed world. Fatalities were miniscule compared with most other countries. Infection rates were low and testing rates high. Australia ranked almost at the top of 100 countries in a Lowy Institute analysis of global pandemic performance. The Fortress Australia approach — capping international arrivals at a few thousand a week, locking out its own citizens, and preventing them from leaving the country without special exemptions — kept cases mostly in the manageable single digits.

With the arrival of the Delta variant on our shores, this approach failed. Covid thrived, undeterred by fortress walls and heedless of months of harsh lockdowns limiting the freedoms of most Australians. Tens of thousands of Australian citizens remain unable to return home 18 months after the pandemic hit. International students and foreign workers are still locked out, risking harm to the Australian economy over the long term.

The country managed the early days of the crisis exceptionally well. Its conservative government extended generous social welfare assistance to its citizens at a level never seen before. It mobilised a national cabinet of diverse political persuasion, which was largely effective in coordinating national responses. It heeded science-based medical advice. The economy prospered after a brief technical recession.

A year later, states are bickering with each other, divided on whether the zero-Covid strategy is still a realistic goal and still unable to agree on a nationwide system of vaccine passports. The federal government has at critical moments been held hostage to the federal system, forced in June to halve the already very low cap on international arrivals under pressure from states intent on maintaining their zero-Covid status.

BEYOND FORTRESS AUSTRALIA

Australia's initial success is partly to blame for its rollercoaster trajectory. Lulled by low case numbers, Australians seem to have felt no urgency to embrace vaccination. That was for other countries, such as Britain and the United States, where the virus had run rampant from the start. When vaccines eventually became available here, the rollout was excruciatingly slow. Some of it was likely due to poor government communication; some of it related to unlucky bets on ever-so-slightly imperfect vaccines. But the result was a country unprepared for the attack of an infectious variant resistant to the clumsy tool of border-based policy.

In the meantime, Fortress Australia has earned us the sort of international criticism that many of us blithely levelled at most of the world last year as we watched it flounder in infection and closed economies. The criticisms are no longer limited to those from unfortunate Australian travellers and from members of our large expatriate community seeking to return home to see family, attend funerals, or care for sick family members. In the past few months, international commentators have pondered our Covid approach in outlets including the BBC, Bloomberg, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Foreign Policy*.

Yet there are signs the rollercoaster may be climbing out of its trough. Lockdown-weary Australians are now rushing to get vaccinated. The government of New South Wales, the largest and most Covid affected state, promises a general re-opening once key vaccination targets are hit as early as October 2021. Prime Minister Scott Morrison flagged in early September that national cabinet had agreed in principle to raising the capacity of international arrivals to help more Australians stranded abroad get home.

Which leads back to where Australia started, with harsh border restrictions. We need to unwind them, and fast. Much more is at stake than adverse commentary in international newspapers. The huge pool of both Australian expatriate talent, which enhances the country's reputation abroad, and foreign expatriate talent in Australia, which contributes to our prosperity at home, needs reassurance that they have not been forsaken. International students, who constitute our fourth-largest export, need to be welcomed back to our universities. Seasonal workers, critical to the success of Australian agriculture, need to be allowed in. Australian business and industry need access to foreign investments, opportunities, and customers.

*What counts now
is not cases but
fatalities, not
eradication but
vaccination.*

To do this, our pre-Delta variant definition of success must be abandoned. Zero-Covid was a dangerous illusion. What almost every other advanced economy in the world has realised is that what counts now is not cases but fatalities, not eradication but vaccination, not confinement but re-opening. Australia is one of the most globally-enmeshed nations of the world and this is key to our success. Prolonging our isolation for any longer will damage our enviable prosperity and standing in the world.

Alex Oliver was the Director of Research at the Lowy Institute from 2018 to 2021, and prior to that Director of the Institute's Diplomacy and Public Opinion Program.

LOWY INSTITUTE

31 Bligh Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Tel. +61 2 8238 9000
Fax +61 2 8238 9005

lowyinstitute.org
[@LowyInstitute](https://www.instagram.com/LowyInstitute)