

The Defence Strategic Review: How not to think about security

Mark Beeson

September 18 2022

Note: This article appeared in *Pearls and Irritations*, a public affairs blog, on September 18 2022.

In both Australia and China strategic debates are dominated by specialists with similar views, a situation epitomised by the forthcoming Defence Strategic Review. A fixation with traditional threats wastes resources, increases the risk of conflict, and makes addressing the immediate danger posed by climate change even more difficult.

We live in surprisingly troubled times. True, much of the world's population has never enjoyed the prospect of rising living standards, moderately competent government or the sort of existential security that many of us in the West take for granted. But at least some parts of the world had grounds for optimism.

No longer. Not only has interstate war made an unwelcome and largely unexpected reappearance in Europe, but the entire human race is faced with an unprecedented, possibly unavoidable crisis that threatens even the privileged lifestyles of the fortunate few. One might think that the plausible threat of environmentally induced civilisational collapse would focus the minds of policymakers everywhere. Sadly not.

To be fair, the United Nations' Secretary-General António Guterres has [attempted to alert the 'international community'](#) to our imminent collective peril. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as the international community: the world remains bereft of anything approaching global governance and subject to the parochial preferences of national leaders, some of whom are breathtakingly ignorant and/or megalomaniacal.

Donald Trump is the most consequential example of the genre, and his possible re-election is, according to the *Financial Times'* Martin Wolf, likely to prove another step on [America's seemingly unstoppable 'journey towards autocracy'](#) Trump's embrace of despots like Putin, and his cavalier approach to allies, makes this an especially alarming prospect for Australia's strategic elites.

The possible end of America's role as the self-appointed standard bearer of democracy and liberalism comes at an especially awkward time for Australia. The Biden administration continually characterises the current era as a contest between democracy and autocracy, with the People's Republic of China cast as the most consequential exemplar of the latter. There is little doubt that this is how Australian strategic elites see the PRC, too, a reality that is reflected in increasingly heated debates about defence policy and expenditure.

The latest iteration of the growing obsession with national security is the 'Defence Strategic Review', to be undertaken by former Australian Defence Force chief, Angus Houston, and a former Labor defence minister, Stephen Smith. According to the Review's [terms of reference](#):

The world is undergoing significant strategic realignment. Military modernisation, technological disruption and the risk of state-on-state conflict are complicating Australia's strategic circumstances.

These strategic changes demand the Australian Government re-assess the capabilities and posture of the Australian Defence Force and broader Department of Defence.

While both Houston and Smith may be well qualified to undertake such a review, no doubt, it is striking that there is no mention of climate change, which presents an unambiguous ‘clear and present danger’, and a rapidly accelerating one at that.

Given their brief, it is not too difficult to guess what the results of this inquiry will be: an overwhelming emphasis on ‘traditional’ threats of a sort that China seems to encapsulate, with an equally predictable call for more defence expenditure and a greater commitment to the alliance with the US – no matter who may be in the White House.

No doubt there will be much earnest and informed debate about the efficacy of various weapons systems, but for a ‘middle power’ such as Australia there is one underlying reality that no amount of strategic nuance can conceal: no matter how many submarines, planes or other exotic, eye-wateringly expensive hardware our military acquires, it will not change the strategic calculus of its counterparts in the PRC.

Us and them

In the interest of full disclosure, I should confess that some of my best friends are Chinese. This is not a flippant point: my view of China has undoubtedly been shaped by the numerous visits I have made there, the scholars I have worked with, and the Chinese students I have supervised. Under such circumstances, it becomes clear that ‘China’ is not a mindless, ideologically uniform monolith. Or it’s not yet, at least.

The omens are not good, however, and the deterioration in the relationship with Australia is not helping. To be sure, China under Xi Jinping has become more expansionist overseas and more showily patriotic at home, but popular opinion is not uniformly, rabidly nationalistic. And yet for those pushing a more ‘assertive’ strategic policy in China, the inauguration of a hostile-looking [Anglo-American alliance such as AUKUS](#) is grist to the mill.

Even students who have studied in Australia and the US may be reluctant to put in a good word for their former hosts when it comes to issues such as the status of Taiwan. Indeed, [when the PRC states](#) that ‘we will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces or radical action by separatist elements’, failing to support the national consensus looks positively treacherous.

While I have had the opportunity of observing at first-hand how rapidly Chinese students and even scholars may revert to the Party line when they return home, concern about career prospects and peer group opinion are hardly unique to China. On the contrary, forms of acculturation in which widely held, actively promoted, social and institutional values exert a powerful influence over individuals are universal.

Given the emphasis Australian universities place on the merits and inculcation of ‘critical thinking’, there is no little irony in this. For those of us who would like to see Australian policymakers take a more independent, less belligerent, and more appropriately focused attitude to security questions, one of the more sobering and instructive lessons has been provided by the experiences of domestic students after graduation.

One of the few growth areas in government employment has been in [defence and the security agencies](#). Young people who might have aspired to help resolve the panoply of global problems that threaten our collective existence and who may have more in common with their peers in other countries than they do with their ageing leaders find themselves working as spooks, strategic analysts and security specialists of one sort or another.

None of them appear to work on the sort of climate related issues that pose such a direct threat to the driest continent on the planet other than thinking about how to deal with waves of unwanted climate refugees, perhaps. While I sympathise with graduates desperate to kick start their careers in Canberra, it’s important to recognise what this may involve. Anyone [working for the Department of Defence](#) will be expected to be ‘dedicated to protecting Australian interests’, however they may be defined.

The pressure to get with the program may prove irresistible, especially when acceptance and career progress depends upon it. Perhaps there are vigorous internal debates about the wisdom or even the necessity of buying seemingly evermore military hardware, but they don't have much impact if they do. On the contrary, our strategic elites seem incapable of saying no to even the most unlikely, untested and unaffordable weapons systems. As the ANU's [Australian National University] [John Blaxland puts it](#): 'the more the merrier'.

It is not just what economists like to call the 'opportunity costs' that matter here, though. To be sure, we can't spend money on restructuring the economy along environmentally sustainable lines if we've splurged our limited resources on submarines. Equally importantly, we may have further enraged and alienated our biggest trade partner while locking ourselves into the strategic decisions of our principal ally; as the people of Afghanistan can attest, the latter are not always principled or wise even in the post-Trump era.

Ideational inertia

While there is a good deal of debate about security policy generally and relations with China in particular at present, there is a surprising amount of agreement about what ought to be done amongst decision-makers. The newly installed Albanese government is not much different from its predecessor and clearly keen not to look 'weak' or irresolute when it comes to either [standing up to China or supporting the US](#).

While there may be something to be said for both propositions, the contours of the debate are remarkably constricted. No one advocating *decreased* military spending, for example, is likely to get a hearing, much less be taken seriously. And yet if there is one group of analysts and policymakers that ought to be alert to the dangers of groupthink, it is security specialists. The lessons that ought to have been absorbed from the Cuban missile crisis and the conduct of the Vietnam War plainly remain unlearned.

Indeed, there is something unsettlingly similar to the origins of World War I in the current faith in deterrence and the efficacy of ever greater expenditure on guns and bombs. Deterrence is fine while it seems to work. The problem is what happens when it ceases to do so, as it has in Ukraine and may yet in Taiwan? Having mountains of military hardware on hand at such moments may not be quite such an asset, as the 'war to end all wars' so vividly demonstrated.

No doubt such observations will be dismissed as naïve by those who are responsible for our collective security. But China, and the US, for that matter, is currently in the grip of unprecedented, accelerating climate crisis that directly threatens the lives and future of its population; just as we are, in fact. Recognising that all nations now face precisely the same sort of existential threat, and that it is not primarily military might be helpful, to put it mildly.

I'm not holding my breath, but, theoretically, at least, we could cooperate internationally to address a challenge with no historical parallel that simply cannot be ameliorated, let alone, resolved without hitherto unprecedented levels of coordinated collective action. The [market simply isn't going to fix it](#) for us; which is another idea that many will find difficult to abandon.

Paradoxically enough, therefore, the military hardheads may become even more prominent as a result of our collective inability to recognise, much less make common cause with our neighbours and their similar problems. All too likely failures of collective action will undoubtedly lead to greater geopolitical tensions as climate change drives mass migration and social upheaval.

Even authoritarian China won't be able to keep a lid on domestic instability and economic crisis in the face of ever escalating environmental degradation. The unprecedented [drought and energy crunch that is currently unfolding in China](#) is an alarming foretaste of what is to come.

The temptation to unify the masses by finally resolving the Taiwan problem may become irresistible under such circumstances. Still, at least we may get to see if the new subs work before they are vaporised. Let's hope they arrive in time.

Professor Mark Beeson is an Adjunct Professor at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney.