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Australia's post-DSR posture and US 'integrated deterrence': A road to nowhere?

Michael Clarke

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This is the second of a four-part UTS:ACRI Analysis series that examines an interlinked set of questions for Australian defence and strategic policy stemming from the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) released in April 2023. The series began by providing an assessment of the consistency between the stated concept of deterrence at the heart of the DSR and the capability acquisitions (including the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines) that are flagged to implement that strategy. Part 2 now turns to the broader question of how the defence concept and capabilities detailed in the DSR are aligned with that of Australia's alliance partner, the US. Part 3 provides an examination of how well tailored Australian strategy and capabilities are to meet the challenge from China's current strategic posture and military capabilities. Part 4 concludes the series with a discussion of how Australia may overcome the political, strategic and capability obstacles the preceding analysis has identified.

Key takeaways

- The Defence Strategic Review (DSR) implies that Australian defence strategy has been conceptually aligned with the Biden administration's strategy of 'integrated deterrence' but there remains great uncertainty about how this will be operationalised.

- A major risk for Australia in this context is that there appears to be a misalignment between the conceptual underpinnings of evolving US strategy and Australia's post-DSR strategic and capability trajectory.

- This risk is expressed in major contradictions between the implied role of Australia as a strategic 'support base' for US military presence in the Indo-Pacific and the DSR's prioritisation of major capability acquisitions such as the future nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) and the operational advantages of the future SSN capability and the explicit deterrence strategy enunciated in the DSR.

Introduction

Part 1 of this UTS:ACRI Analysis series assessed the compatibility between the stated concept of deterrence by denial at the heart of the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) and the capability acquisitions, including the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs), that have been committed to by the Morrison and Albanese governments to implement that strategy. That assessment found that there was a misalignment of capability and strategy that held the potential to undo one of the supporting planks of Australia's 'China choice', i.e. to develop the capabilities to bolster American power in the Indo-Pacific. The assessment, however, concluded by noting that the Morrison and Albanese governments' commitment to making Australia a support base for US operations and force rotations, enhancing the Australian Defence Force's 'interoperability' with the US military, and pursuing 'defence industrial integration', suggested that the DSR should be understood in the context of evolving US strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

This analysis will examine how Australia's post-DSR strategic posture and capabilities align with that of the US. It will argue that while the strategy and capabilities detailed in the DSR implies that Australian defence strategy has been conceptually aligned with the Biden administration's strategy of 'integrated deterrence', there remains great uncertainty about how this will be operationalised. An examination of Biden administration thinking and statements on the concept, and its implications for Australia, will demonstrate that tying Australian defence and strategic policy to it runs the risk of becoming a road to nowhere due to a misalignment between evolving US strategy and Australia's post-DSR strategic and capability trajectory.

The risk is expressed in contradictions between: (1) the implied role of Australia as a strategic 'support base' for US military presence in the Indo-Pacific and the DSR's prioritisation of major capability acquisitions such as the future SSNs; (2) the operational advantages of the future SSN capability and the explicit deterrence strategy enunciated in the DSR; and (3) the capabilities and strategy identified in the DSR and the conceptual underpinnings of the Biden administration's 'integrated deterrence' construct. These contradictions should at the very least raise considerable concern in view of the political, economic and strategic stakes at risk for Australia under its 'China choice'.

What is 'integrated deterrence'?

The Biden administration's March 2021 *Interim National Security Guidance* (INSG) identified two issues that have subsequently shaped US defence strategy: threats posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, and the challenges of deterring their 'aggression'.[1] While the means of doing so remained underspecified in the INSG, the document did hint at the direction of the administration's thinking, asserting that a core objective was to 'promote a favourable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions'.[2] To do this effectively, however, the US must 'work with like-minded partners, and pool our collective strength to advance shared interests and deter common threats'. By 'bolstering and defending our unparalleled network of allies and partners', the INSG continued, 'we will also deter Chinese aggression and counter threats to our collective security, prosperity, and democratic way of life'.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III subsequently built on these themes in speeches in May and July 2021. During an address to the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii on May 3 2021, he affirmed that the 'cornerstone of America's defence is still deterrence', which 'meant fixing a basic truth within the minds of our potential foes: that the costs and risks of aggression are out of line with any conceivable benefit.'[3] But to achieve this in the 21st century, the US would have to undertake 'integrated deterrence'. This would mean to 'use existing capabilities, and build new ones, and use all of them in networked ways', and also to do so 'hand-in-hand with our allies and partners.'[4] A similar definition was then offered during an address in Singapore on July 27 2021.

1   The White House, *Interim National Security Guidance*, March 2021 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
2   *Ibid*, at p. 9.
3   Department of Defense News, 'Defense Secretary says 'integrated deterrence' is cornerstone of US defense', *US Indo-Pacific Command*, May 3 2021 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2593958/defense-secretary-says-integrated-deterrence-is-cornerstone-of-us-defense/>.
4   *Ibid*.

Secretary Austin defined 'integrated deterrence' as 'using existing capabilities, and building new ones, and deploying them all in new and networked ways – all tailored to a region's security landscape, and growing in partnership with our friends.'[5]

Yet the exact content of the 'integrated deterrence' neologism, and how it differed from the multitude of adjectival forms of deterrence that have punctuated US defence strategy in recent decades, remained a mystery. It was not until the administration's almost simultaneous release of its National Defense Strategy (NDS) and National Security Strategy (NSS) on October 27 2022 and November 8 2022 that this mystery was partly solved.

The NDS presented a three-pronged approach of 'integrated deterrence', 'campaigning' and 'building enduring advantages' to counter what it termed the US' 'most consequential strategic competitor' (i.e. the PRC).

The NDS defined 'integrated deterrence' as 'developing and combining our strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theatres, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of US national power, and our unmatched network of alliances and partnerships. Integrated deterrence is enabled by combat-credible forces, backstopped by a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent.'[6] Meanwhile, 'campaigning' meant 'the conduct and sequencing of logically linked military initiatives aimed at advancing well-defined, strategy-aligned priorities over time' so that the Department of Defense could 'operate forces, synchronise broader Departmental efforts, and align Departmental activities with other instruments of national power, to undermine acute forms of competitor coercion, complicate competitors' military preparations, and develop our own warfighting capabilities together with allies and partners.'[7] Finally, 'building enduring advantages' entailed 'undertaking reforms to accelerate force development, getting the technology we need more quickly, and making investments in the extraordinary people of the Department, who remain our most valuable resource'.

American satirist James H. Boren once described such tortuous bureaucratese as constituting 'mumbling with professional eloquence'. Such mumbling, he argued, was defined by 'mixing tonal patterns with multisyllabic words for the purpose of projecting an image of knowledgeability and competence without regard to either knowledge or competence.'[8]

Deconstructing in plain language what this 'mumbling' means in practice reveals that 'integrated deterrence' has little to do with deterrence as it is conventionally understood.

On the one hand, as the Center for Strategic and International Studies senior fellow Kathleen McInnis has noted, a core (and admirable) thrust of administration statements on 'integrated deterrence' is to show that it seeks to communicate that 'deterrence is distinct from the nuclear deterrent'[9]; communicate the 'US government intention to act in certain scenarios and parameters'; utilise 'all aspects of national power, not just the military, to communicate intent'; and ensure that 'US signals are coordinated with those of allies and partners.'[10]

But there is a lack of clear connection between the neologism and concepts central to deterrence such as 'the manipulation of risk, threats that aim to prevent something from happening, the application of force

5   US Department of Defense, 'Transcript: Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III participates in Fullerton Lecture Series in Singapore', July 27 2023 <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2711025/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-participates-in-fullerton-lecture-serie/>.
6   US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 27 2022, p. 1 <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.
7   *Ibid*.
8   James H. Boren, *When in Doubt, Mumble: A Bureaucrat's Handbook* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972).
9   This distinction is implied by the NDS' statement that 'integrated deterrence' is '*backstopped* by a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent'.
10 Kathleen McInnis, 'Integrated deterrence is not so bad', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 27 2022 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/integrated-deterrence-not-so-bad>.

to achieve defined goals, or logics of punishment or denial.'[11] This suggests that the administration 'does not have a theory of coercion to deal with great power revanchism'. Rather, 'integrated deterrence', via its emphasis on greater burden-shifting to allies and advanced conventional capabilities 'backstopped' by its nuclear deterrent 'is best understood as referring to escalation avoidance in contingency planning for limited war.'[12]

That 'integrated deterrence' is not concerned with a theory of coercion is indicated by some statements of administration officials surrounding the war in Ukraine. Soon after the Russian invasion, anonymous Pentagon officials were quoted by the *Washington Post* that the US-led response showed that the 'model of integrated deterrence comes out smelling pretty good'.[13] The rationale, according to an anonymous official, was that the US response has leveraged its 'primacy in the global financial system' and its alliance networks 'in ways that can absolutely pummel aggressors.'[14] This line of argument was subsequently deployed by Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks during a briefing on the administration's requested 2023 financial year defence budget request. Hicks asserted, in response to questioning, that the US-led response to Ukraine had *enhanced* deterrence by making the 'costs and folly of aggression' by adversaries 'very clear'.[15]

However this line of argument ignores the basic fact that Russia invaded Ukraine *despite* US-led efforts to deter it from doing so.[16] What the official is referring to instead is the administration's effective marshalling of a US and allied diplomatic and economic *response* to that event. Significantly, the administration, both in its pre-invasion attempts to deter Putin and post-invasion efforts to assist Ukraine, has studiously avoided consideration of *direct* application of US military capabilities. There are good reasons for this (e.g. concerns about risking escalation to a direct Russia-NATO confrontation) but it begs the question as to what role the administration sees for American military capabilities playing in 'integrated deterrence'?

What, then, of 'campaigning'? The NDS tortuously defines this as 'the conduct and sequencing of logically linked military initiatives aimed at advancing well-defined, strategy-aligned priorities over time' so that the Department of Defense can 'operate forces, synchronise broader Departmental efforts, and align Departmental activities with other instruments of national power, to undermine acute forms of competitor coercion, complicate competitors' military preparations, and develop our own warfighting capabilities together with allies and partners'. In plain language, as two analysts from the Hudson Institute note, this appears to be drawn from US Marine Corps doctrine and refers to the 'orchestration of military activities alongside economic, diplomatic and information actions to achieve specific goals.'[17]

Finally, 'building enduring advantages' is arguably the most straightforward, entailing 'undertaking reforms to accelerate force development, getting the technology we need more quickly, and making investments in the extraordinary people of the Department, who remain our most valuable resource'. This amounts to a sensible focus on the material and human elements of capability acquisition and development necessary to counter perceived challenges/threats.

Deterrence without coercion?

What does this 'mumbling' mean for how we might understand evolving US strategy and defence posture?

11 Van Jackson, 'What is integrated deterrence? A gap between US and Australian strategic thought', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 4 (2) (2022), p. 267 <https://www.defence.gov.au/research-innovation/research-publications/australian-journal-defence-and-strategic-studies-volume-4-number-2>.

12 *Ibid*, at p. 266.

13 Greg Jaffe and Dan Lamothe, 'Russia's failures in Ukraine imbue the Pentagon with new confidence', *Washington Post*, March 26 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/03/26/russia-ukraine-pentagon-american-power/>.

14 *Ibid*.

15 C-SPAN, 'Fiscal year 2023 Defense budget request briefing: Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks and Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chair Admiral Christopher Grady outlined President Biden's fiscal year 2023 budget request for the military', *C-SPAN*, March 28 2022 <https://www.c-span.org/video/?519076-1/fiscal-year-2023-defense-budget-request-briefing>.

16 See Erin Banco, Garrett M. Graff, Lara Seligman, Nahal Toosi and Alexander Ward, ''Something was badly wrong': When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine', *Politico*, February 24 2023 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-oral-history-00083757>; and Liam Collins and Frank Sobchak, 'US deterrence failed in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, February 20 2023 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/20/ukraine-deterrence-failed-putin-invasion/>.

17 Bryan Clark and Dan Patt, 'The Pentagon must 'campaign' against China, not hope for a goal-line stand', *Defense One*, April 10 2022 <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/04/pentagon-must-campaign-against-china-not-hope-goal-line-stand/365453/>.

'Integrated deterrence' suggests three major – and interlinked – dynamics in current US strategy and defence posture. The first is that 'integrated deterrence' appears to not be directly concerned with deterrence but rather with dissuasion. The distinction between the two concepts is important. Deterrence, as RAND Corporation political scientist Michael Mazarr states, is 'the practice of discouraging or restraining someone' from 'taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack'; it is designed 'to stop or prevent an action' from taking place.[18] Dissuasion, by contrast, is a broader concept that seeks to shape a (potential) adversary's *long-term* behaviour, 'discouraging that country from embracing policies and building forces that could produce political confrontation, military competition, and war.'[19]

Dissuasion therefore acts 'not by threatening direct military retaliation as an ever-present reality' – as most theories of deterrence hold – but rather 'by making clear that it will thwart and frustrate hostile steps through countervailing measures of its own.'[20] Key to successful dissuasion is an element of reassurance: the dissuader must be able to provide the adversary with assurance that *if* it avoids 'embracing policies and building forces' that could produce conflict, the dissuader will not proceed with countervailing measures. Dissuasion can thus 'be viewed as a kind of pre-deterrence' as it is designed to address less immediate challenges through the leveraging *not only* of military but diplomatic and economic instruments of national power to convince a potential adversary not to pursue certain military and strategic actions that may make conflict more likely.[21]

This, arguably, is what the US undertook *after* the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It endeavoured not only to supply Ukraine with what it required to defend itself but also sought to ensure that the conflict did not spread beyond Ukraine and/or escalate to a Russia-NATO conflict. The administration, as Canadian political scientist Janice Gross Stein argues, combated Russia's 'strategy to manipulate uncertainty' – through its repeated threats of nuclear escalation – with 'a strategy to reduce uncertainty' based on the establishment of 'five boundary conditions' to guide the American response.[22] Indeed, as reported by *Politico*, President Joe Biden, as early as October 2021, had identified three guidelines for the US response should Russia not be deterred from invading Ukraine: 'Support Ukraine – nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine, bolster NATO, and avoid a war with Russia.'[23]

The 'integrated deterrence' construct suggests that the administration is concerned primarily with escalation management and burden-shifting rather than deterrence. With respect to the former, the NDS (and Nuclear Posture Review released with it) seeks to subordinate US nuclear strategy to overall defence strategy where US nuclear capabilities become a 'backstop' to its advanced conventional capabilities. As such, 'integrated deterrence' envisages US nuclear capabilities as providing a 'defensive mission meant only to complement offensive but non-nuclear ones.'[24] The objective, as the NPR states, is to 'strengthen deterrence and raise the nuclear threshold of our potential adversaries in regional conflict by undermining adversary confidence in strategies for limited war that rely on the threat of nuclear escalation.'[25]

18   Michael Mazarr, 'Understanding deterrence', RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 2 <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf?msclkid=ad30168aba0511ec8458c95aecae0d25>.

19   Richard Kugler, 'Dissuasion as a strategic concept', *Strategic Forum*, no. 196, Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defense University, December 2002, p. 1 <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA421905.pdf>.

20   *Ibid*.

21   Andrew F. Krepinevich and Robert C. Martinage, *Dissuasion Strategy*, Centre For Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 6 2008, p. vii <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2008/05/dissuasion-strategy/>.

22   Janice Gross Stein, 'Escalation management in Ukraine: 'Learning by doing' in response to the 'threat that leaves something to chance'', *Texas National Security Review*, 6 (3) (2023), pp. 40-41. The five boundary conditions were that: (1) US did not seek war between Russia and NATO; (2) As long as no NATO states were attacked, the US would not fight directly in Ukraine; (3) the US would not seek the removal of President Putin; (4) the US would not 'encourage or enable' Ukraine to 'strike beyond its borders'; and (5) Russian use of nuclear weapons would be 'unacceptable' and induce 'severe consequences'.

23   Quoted in Erin Banco, Garrett M. Graff, Lara Seligman, Nahal Toosi and Alexander Ward, ''Something was badly wrong': When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine', *Politico*, February 24 2023 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-oral-history-00083757>.

24   Van Jackson, 'What is integrated deterrence? A gap between US and Australian strategic thought', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 4 (2) (2022), p. 268 <https://www.defence.gov.au/research-innovation/research-publications/australian-journal-defence-and-strategic-studies-volume-4-number-2>.

25   US Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 27 2022, pp. 9-10 <https://s3.amazonaws.com/uploads.fas.org/2022/10/27113658/2022-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf>.

With respect to the latter, meanwhile, 'integrated deterrence' clearly emphasises the role of allies and partners in both deterrence missions and force planning. Not only are 'allies' mentioned 141 times in the 80-page NDS, but the document asserts that a central task is to 'anchor' American strategy in them.[26] Such 'anchoring' will be attained through prioritising 'interoperability', enabling 'coalitions with enhanced capabilities', and developing 'new operating concepts' and 'combined, collaborative force planning'.[27] This constitutes a major shift in US strategy as allies 'have historically featured in force planning as sources of political legitimacy, or providers of territorial access, but their expected battlefield contributions were typically treated as marginal.'[28] However, 'integrated deterrence' canvasses the possibility that future deterrence contingencies will not only be 'all-domain but all-coalition'.[29]

The themes of dissuasion, escalation control and burden-shifting evident in 'integrated deterrence', combined with the contours of the US response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, indicate that under the current administration, the US is more risk-averse than in the immediate past. It constitutes a tacit admission that it is no longer confident of military superiority in possible conflict scenarios with the PRC.

What does this mean for Australia?

In one sense, the DSR implicitly makes a case for contemporary Australian defence and strategic policy to be best understood through the lens of 'integrated deterrence'. One could argue that the majority of investments in defence capabilities identified in the DSR, and the technology-sharing components of the AUKUS agreement, positions Australia to take the 'local' burden off the US for deterring hostile action by an adversary in its *immediate* region, while freeing Washington to focus on the more complex – and risky – deterrence missions in theatres such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Yet even if we were to accept this, there remain several outstanding questions related to capability, strategy and politics that to date are unresolved.

First, while an Australian SSN capability could undertake a deterrence by punishment mission, it would further commit Australia to participate in any future scenario involving conflict with the PRC. Of note is how the future SSN acquisitions may fit with US strategy. The US Navy's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet has been seen for over a decade as a crucial component of an offset strategy[30] to counter the PRC's advantages in its littoral waters. It would constitute a core component in an anti-surface warfare response to a potential PRC invasion of Taiwan.[31]

The AUKUS submarine 'optimal pathway' is that Canberra will buy up to three Virginia class SSNs from the US, to be delivered in the early 2030s, before the delivery of the trilaterally produced SSN-AUKUS class submarines. This suggests that the initial Virginia submarines would likely be involved in such a scenario. Indeed, former US Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, Christopher Ford, notes that AUKUS could provide Australia with 'the ability to deploy its submarines for the first time from distant Australian bases on extended-duration deployments essentially anywhere in the entire Indo-Pacific' and that if 'fully' implemented, it 'would significantly add to the undersea capabilities capable of supporting US operations in a conflict with China - *including* potentially a Taiwan 'denial' scenario' (author's emphasis).[32]

26 US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 27 2022, p. 14 <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Van Jackson, 'What is integrated deterrence? A gap between US and Australian strategic thought', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 4 (2) (2022), p. 268 <https://www.defence.gov.au/research-innovation/research-publications/australian-journal-defence-and-strategic-studies-volume-4-number-2>.

29 *Ibid.*

30 See, e.g., Rear Admiral W. J. Holland Jr, 'Submarines: Key to the offset strategy', *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, 141 (6) (2015) <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015/june/submarines-key-offset-strategy>; and Timothy A. Walton, 'Securing the third offset strategy: Priorities for the next Secretary of Defense', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 82 (3) (2016), pp. 9-11.

31 See Eric Heginbotham et. al, *The US-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. 201-224.

32 Christopher R. Ford, 'Defending Taiwan: Defense and deterrence', Occasional Paper no. 2, National Institute for Public Policy, February 2022, p. 54 <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Vol.-2-No.-2-Ford.pdf>.

Australian strategist Paul Dibb has suggested two possibilities for how Australia's SSNs might contribute to such a strategy. He argues that 'our Virginia class SSNs will be able to use 2000-kilometre-range anti-ship missiles to strike China's forces in the Taiwan Strait' from the 'safety of deepwater trenches east of the Philippines without detection', while another role could be to 'deny the narrow straits of Southeast Asia to China's overseas trade', which would constitute 'an important, independent military role for Australia, but without the potentially high cost of losing our relatively small number of military assets in a direct war over Taiwan.'[33]

The assumption that Australian SSN capabilities will likely be involved in such a scenario is also reinforced by the hard realities of the current production constraints on US Navy shipyards. This, as the Australian National University's Hugh White suggests, increases the probability that 'America will only sell us Virginia class boats if absolutely certain that those boats would join US operations in any war with China' as those submarines 'will come straight out of the US Navy's order of battle, because no extra Virginia class boats are to be built to meet Australian needs.'[34]

That this latter point is not mere speculation is underlined by a *Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report* of September 25 2023. The report notes that given the production constraints, a 'potential alternative to the proposed sale of Virginia class SSNs to Australia would be a US-Australian military division of labour under which US SSNs would perform *both* US and Australian SSN missions while Australia invested in military forces for performing other military missions for both Australia and the United States' (author's emphasis).[35] Under this scenario, 'Australia, instead of using funds to purchase, operate, and maintain three to five Virginia class SSNs, would instead invest those funds in other military capabilities (such as, for example, the production of long-range anti-ship missiles)' thereby creating capacity to undertake these 'other military missions for both Australia and the United States.'[36]

This situation leads to several questions. It casts doubt on not only the notion that Australia will obtain Virginia class SSNs in the timeframe identified under the 'optimal pathway' but also on whether Australia will get them at all. The alternative noted by the *CRS Report* – that US SSNs will perform 'both US and Australian SSN missions', in turn, raises questions about how this will in fact be a 'sovereign' capability and whose deterrence missions will be prioritised.[37]

Second, what strategy will animate Australia's SSN capability (if it were in fact to meet the 'optimal pathway' blueprint)? Adopting a deterrence by punishment strategy with respect to the PRC, as noted in Part 1 of this series, is inherently escalatory. In the most likely theatres in which conflict is conceivable, such as the South China Sea or Taiwan, geographic proximity and Chinese anti-access/area denial capabilities means that a punishment strategy would have to undertake counter-value strikes on the PRC mainland to be credible. In this respect, the Pentagon's latest *China Military Power Report* assesses that '[t]he PLA's A2/AD - otherwise known as 'counterintervention' - capabilities are, to date, the most robust within the FIC [first island chain]'.[38] This raises doubts as to the credibility and prudence of an Australian SSN undertaking such missions.

Third, what does the emphasis placed on allied cooperation in achieving 'collective security' in the Biden administration's NDS imply for the role of Australian capabilities? The NDS states that under 'integrated deterrence', the US 'will support regional partners'' ability to respond to regional contingencies, provide

33 Paul Dibb, 'Would China dare launch a nuclear war on Australia?', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 9 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/will-china-target-australia-and-how-would-australia-respond/>.

34 Hugh White, 'AUKUS commits Australia to fight China, if America does, simple', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, March 23 2023 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-commits-australia-fight-china-if-america-does-simple>.

35 Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine Proposal: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report, RL32418, Congressional Research Service, September 25 2023, p. 17 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=RL32418>.

36 *Ibid,* at p. 18.

37 For Albanese government assertions that the 'optimal pathway' will deliver a 'sovereign' capability see, Andrew Greene, 'Defence Minister insists AUKUS will enhance Australia's sovereignty, not dependence on US', *ABC News*, February 9 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-09/richard-marles-aukus-sovereignty-united-states-dependence/101947732>.

38 See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, US Department of Defense, October 2023, p. 88 <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

strategic indicators and warnings, and reduce competitors' ability to hold key geographic and logistical chokepoints at risk'.[39] The AUKUS agreement, new US force rotations in Australia and the DSR-related capability commitments can be seen as speaking to these priorities.

One view of what this would look like in practice has been offered by a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace senior fellow, Ashley Townshend. He suggests that 'in a regional crisis or contingency' there would be a 'division of labour' in which 'Australia would offer access to ports, bases, airfields, fuel depots, and other strategic infrastructure; deliver logistics, sustainment, and maintenance support to US forces; secure its immediate region from threats to the continent; and provide a degree of operational support for US power projection and the flow of forces into theatre.'[40]

Australia's role in 'integrated deterrence', in this rendering, is that of a 'suitable piece of real estate'[41]: a secure support base for US power projection into the Indo-Pacific, whose own military capability would be sufficient to undertake both Defence of Australia missions (i.e. defending the continent's northern approaches) and provide some operational support to US forces in missions beyond Australia's immediate environment.

Conclusion

While such a posture is consistent with the evolution of Australian strategic and defence policy and may be defensible from a geopolitical perspective,[42] it does little to clarify what role the future SSNs will play in either Australia's own strategy of 'deterrence by denial' or the broader objective of 'collective security' under 'integrated deterrence'.

Rather, what we are left with is several contradictions.

The first, as detailed above, derives from the misalignment between the operational advantages of the future SSN capability, and the explicit strategy (deterrence by denial) that the DSR identifies as animating it. This is in contrast to SSN capabilities arguably being more suited for the unviable strategy of undertaking deterrence by punishment missions against the PRC. Have we, in light of this, committed to a capability without a coherent strategic concept that matches the capability with the specific security challenge it is designed to meet?

The second concerns how Australian capabilities and strategy fit with the Biden administration's 'integrated deterrence' construct. If Australia is envisaged as simply becoming a more technologically enabled 'suitable piece of real estate' providing strategic depth and operational support to US forces, what role will the future SSN capability fulfill? The Biden administration's emphasis on 'anchoring' its strategy in allies – including collaborative force planning – suggests that under 'integrated deterrence', allies such as Australia will be expected to not simply be suitable pieces of real estate for deployment of US forces but also capable of making direct contributions to deterrence contingencies. Can we expect the future SSN capability, for example, to serve a support role to wider US missions, for instance blockading chokepoints during a regional crisis? Given the significant uncertainties now surrounding the future SSNs, is such a role worth the considerable economic and strategic risks of this undertaking?

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39 US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 27 2022, p. 14 <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

40 Ashley Townshend, 'How to manage the risks and requirements of US-Australia force posture cooperation', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 20 2023 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/10/20/how-to-manage-risks-and-requirements-of-u.s.-australia-force-posture-cooperation-pub-90817>. It should be noted that Townshend will soon take up a position as an Assistant Secretary in the Australian Department of Defence <https://twitter.com/ashleytownshend/status/1715907315105497194>.

41 Desmond Ball, *A Suitable Piece of Real Estate: American Installations in Australia* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1980).

42 See Michael Clarke and Matthew Sussex, *China, Australia's National Security Choices and Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, August 8 2022, pp. 1-62 <https://www.uts.edu.au/acri/research-and-opinion/research-reports/china-australias-national-security-choices-and-great-power-competition-indo-pacific>.

Finally, are Washington and Canberra speaking the same language of deterrence? The Biden administration's conceptualisation and practice of 'integrated deterrence' is not so much geared to deterring immediate threats, but rather aims to leverage military, diplomatic and economic instruments of national power to deter certain military and strategic actions that may make conflict more likely. Does Australia share this perspective, or does it perceive the PRC to be a more immediate threat to regional security?

Taken together, these contradictions raise a further question: are Australian strategy and capabilities sufficiently tailored to meet the challenge from the PRC's current strategic posture and military capabilities?

This is the question that Part 3 of this UTS:ACRI Analysis series will examine.

Author

Dr Michael Clarke is Adjunct Professor at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney. He has published widely on contemporary Chinese security and foreign policy, American grand strategy, Australian foreign policy and nuclear strategy, arms control and nonproliferation. He is the author (with Stephan Fruhling and Andrew O'Neil) of *Australian Nuclear Policy: Reconciling Strategic, Economic and Normative Interests* (Routledge, 2015), author of *American Grand Strategy and National Security: The Dilemmas of Primacy and Decline from the Founders to Trump* (Palgrave, 2021), and editor of *The Xinjiang Emergency: Exploring the Causes and Consequences of China's Mass Detention of Uyghurs* (Manchester University Press, 2022).