AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

The Listening Post

Centre for Defence Research
Issue 1, September 2021

Welcome to the first issue of *The Listening Post*, a monthly digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts published over the course of the month on global, regional and Australian defence and strategic issues. Our aim is for *The Listening Post* to provide an easy access repository of up-to-date articles, commentary and analysis on major defence and strategic policy, problems and debates for senior ADF personnel and Defence civilians working on issues related to Australian strategic policy.

Afghanistan fallout and the 20th anniversary of 9/11

This month we begin with two notable highlights from amongst the wealth of material published on the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the 20th anniversary of the attacks of 9/11.

First, Adam Tooze's long-form essay for The New Statesman argues that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has in fact distracted attention from what he discerns to be the (attempted) making of a "new age" of American power. He dismisses talk that American withdrawal signals either the collapse of the Pax Americana, the decline of the West or China's ascent to fill the vacuum as "compelling" but ultimately "misleading" storylines. Rather, the United States – through its financial heft and military power - retains two key mechanisms through which it still defines international order. Tooze makes a compelling case that if we look closely at the Pentagon's budgets and "the strategies that direct them" what we see is that the United States is in fact girding itself to maintain American primacy through an attempt to break the historical link between economic performance and military power "by denying China strategic technologies and by sharpening America's own technological edge".

Second, Amy Zegart writes for Politico that the two decades long "War on Terror" (WOT) has warped both the CIA's organizational architecture and, perhaps more importantly, hampered its capacity to undertake what was the "agency's original purpose of preventing strategic surprise — that is, anticipating major threats to the nation before they materialize". Zegart details the manner in which the WOT melded "intelligence and traditional military activities" together. "The military", she notes, "now conducts black operations against terrorists that look a lot like covert action, while the CIA openly engages in activities that resemble military action — like launching the drone strike in Yemen that killed Anwar al-Awlaki". The problem however is that this distracts from the CIA's core purpose: "preventing strategic surprise to the nation". "Battlefield intelligence is about the here and now. It's tactical, near-term, on-the-ground, nitty-gritty", whereas "Intelligence to prevent strategic surprise is longer-term, over-the-horizon, bigger-picture" such as determining "what it would take to convince Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program or the prospects of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan". A scenario in which one is confused with the other "is a world in which the CIA isn't doing its core job well enough — and that makes nasty surprises far more likely".

AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE COLLEGE
PROPTER POSTEROS DISCIMUS
AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Further reading on the Afghanistan fallout and legacy of 9/11:
Evan Montgomery, "Credibility Controversies: The Implications of Afghanistan for the Indo-Pacific", *War on the Rocks*, 7 September 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/credibility-controversies-the-implications-of-afghanistan-for-the-indo-pacific/

Peter Maas, "General Failure: How the U.S. Military Lied About the 9/11 Wars", *The Intercept*, 9 September 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/09/08/afghanistan-iraq-generals-soldiers-disciplined-911/

Daniel Bessner, "The Case against Humane War", *The New Republic*, 8 September 2021, https://newrepublic.com/article/163503/case-against-humane-war-book-review-samuel-moyn

Ben Armbruster, "New report: Post-9/11 US airstrikes killed upwards of 48,000 civilians", Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/07/new-report-post-9-11-us-airstrikes-killed-upwards-of-48000-civilians/

Dylan Matthews, "20 years, $6 trillion, 900,000 lives: The enormous costs and elusive benefits of the war on terror", *Vox*, 11 September 2021, https://www.vox.com/22654167/cost-deaths-war-on-terror-afghanistan-iraq-911

US grand strategy
Unsurprisingly, the Afghanistan withdrawal has prompted a further wave of debate about the future of American grand strategy. In the Sept/Oct issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Emma Ashford argues that the post-Cold War consensus that the United States should use its unipolar moment to "pursue a transformational agenda on the world stage" has been replaced over the course of the last decade by a "chorus of voices" advocating for a "strategy of restraint" that not only establishes a much tighter definition of American interests but also is more aware of the limits of American power. The apparent increase in the influence of "restrainer" arguments over the past decade is seen as being illustrated by Obama's efforts to extricate the United States from Iraq and "pivot to Asia", Trump's agreement with the Taliban for American withdrawal and now Biden's decisive – if chaotic – final withdrawal from Afghanistan. If there is now a prevailing sense that the US, in the words of Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, "must get better at seeing both the possibilities and the limits of American power", what would a "strategy of restraint" look like beyond liquidating the so-called "forever wars" of the post-9/11 era?

Distilling the core elements of such a strategy, Ashford notes, is no easy task given that restrainers run "the gamut from left-wing antiwar activists to hard-nosed conservative realists". However, she pinpoints a number of over-lapping and mutually reinforcing preferences from the "offshore balancing" strategic framework of realist scholars John Mearshiemer and Stephen Walt to the desire for less military spending that unites libertarians and the likes of Senator Bernie Sanders. She concludes that the most "viable path" through which this disparate grouping could become truly influential in shaping

American grand strategy is by "promotion of a foreign policy that is realist yet not doctrinaire, internationalist yet prudent". In practical terms this would mean a military posture of "sufficiency rather than primacy", strategic retrenchment and burden shifting to allies, and attempting to thread the needle of great power competition with Russia and China by "maintaining the necessary defense capabilities while avoiding destabilizing arms races and security dilemmas". This, we should note, would be no easy feat.

Further reading and listening on current US grand strategy debates:
Justin Logan, "The Unipole in Twilight: American Strategy from 9/11 to the Present", *The Independent Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, (Fall 2021), https://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_26_2_02_logan.pdf

Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Misplaced Restraint: The Quincy Coalition versus Liberal Internationalism", *Survival* vol. 63, no. 4 (2021), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187

Power Problems podcast: "The 'Restraint Coalition' and Strategy toward China" with Boston University's Joshua Shifrinson, https://podcasts.apple.com/sc/podcast/the-restraint-coalition-and-strategy-toward-china/id1282100393?i=1000531614372

US defense policy
Meanwhile, at *Real Clear Defense*, Robert Harvey, a former Department of Defense appointee under Presidents Clinton and Obama and a member of President George W. Bush's National Nuclear Security Administration, provides a detailed examination of what we can expect from President Biden's forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). Harvey begins by noting that American nuclear forces have for many years been designed to achieve multiple objectives from "deterring nuclear attack against the U.S. and its allies", responding to a nuclear attack on the United States should deterrence fail, deterring "global conventional war with Russia and China", serving as a tool of "counter-proliferation" by deterring the acquisition or use of WMD by others, and promoting "strategic stability". Different administrations, unsurprisingly, have tended to emphasise some of these objectives over others. The Obama administration's 2010 NPR, for instance, sought to maintain strategic deterrence and stability at reduced nuclear force levels, consistent with it undertaking of nuclear arms control with Russia and the President's long term nuclear disarmament objective. More recently, the Trump administration's 2018 NPR broadened rather than narrowed the circumstances under which the United States would consider nuclear use and committed to not only continue the modernization of the "nuclear triad" but to develop new types of warheads, particularly "low-yield" SLBMs and sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs).

The Biden administration, like all incoming administrations Harvey argues, faces a number of major decisions with respect to questions of whether to: "change employment guidance and the impact of changes on the size and composition of the force"; "to adjust force size and missile defense activities to take into account China's rapid buildup of, and quantitative improvements in, its strategic nuclear forces"; "to reverse the decision to begin a program to field a nuclear-armed SLCM"; and "adopt a declaratory policy of 'no first use'". He

concludes that there are already substantial hints about the administration's direction on some of these questions. While Biden in his first week agreed with Vladimir Putin to extend New START, his FY22 Defense budget request of $US752.9 billion includes $43.2 billion for the "Defense and Energy Departments to sustain and modernize U.S. nuclear delivery systems and warheads and their supporting infrastructure" keeping almost par with spending on nuclear weapons under his immediate predecessor.

Further reading on US defense policy:
Walter Pincus, "The Nine Lives of US Defense Programs", *The Cipher Brief*, 6 September 2021, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-nine-lives-of-u-s-defense-programs

Billy Ostermeyer, "Boost Defense Spending? Congress Owes Us a Better Explanation", *Defense One*, 12 September 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/09/boost-defense-spending-congress-owes-us-more-details-and-better-reasons/185281/

Chinese politics and foreign policy
This month sees the publication of a number of significant reports on Chinese politics and foreign policy. First, there is the release of the US Asia Society's Task Force on China Policy report, "China's New Direction: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy", in which some of the biggest names in American China-watching weigh in on "how China under Xi Jinping is evolving in the face of changing domestic needs and external pressures". The report includes in-depth examination of Chinese domestic politics, economic and social challenges as well as China's military modernization, technological "decoupling" from the US, and Chinese trajectory of Chinese diplomacy. The report notes that "a major policy risk is that the U.S. will misread or misinterpret what is happening in China and will either overestimate or underestimate the threat China now poses" and the contributions to it certainly contribute to presenting a clearer understanding of the nature and significance of the challenges posed by Xi's China.

Second, Oxford University's Patricia Thorton provides an excellent review in *China Quarterly* of four new books on Chinese politics and the CCP by some of the leading political scientists in China studies. Tony Saich's *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* in particular is singled out for its "impressively documented analysis of key debates in the field that contests some of the received wisdom on CCP history" including the relative importance of the collapse of the Qing empire in 1911 and the legacies of the Confucian moral order on the Party's ideology and organizational structure. David Shambaugh's *China's Leaders: from Mao to Now* meanwhile presents an analytical approach to the CCP's history through the lens of leadership studies. Building on a taxonomy of leadership developed in political psychology, and owing a debt to classic Weberian accounts of "charismatic" and "rationalist" leadership styles, Shambaugh argues that China's leaders since 1949 can be useful characterised as "transformational leaders" of three basic types: ideational leaders, reform leaders, and ideologues. Such categories, as Shambaugh argues, are not mutually exclusive with Xi Jinping, for instance, coded as embracing elements of all three over time. The history of the CCP is retold by Shambaugh "as a function of each leader's style or governing approach, with the institutions and norms

that characterize Party life serving as 'imperatives' that each of the five men must work within and through". While Shambaugh's "leadership style" framework may be reductive it nonetheless reminds us that while we may assume that continuity would be the norm in a one-party Leninist state, substantial discontinuity has in fact obtained between the Party's paramount leaders in terms of their approach not only to leadership but also to their visions of the role of the Party.

Further reading and listening on Chinese politics and foreign policy:
Hidden Forces podcast: "China's Western Horizon" with Daniel Markey author of *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia,* (Oxford University Press 2020), https://hiddenforces.io/podcasts/daniel-markey-china-eurasia-geopolitics/

Yong Deng, "How China Builds the Credibility of the Belt and Road Initiative", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30 (131) (2021), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2021.1884958?journalCode=cjcc20

Gideon Rachman, "Xi's Personality Cult is a Threat to China", *Financial Times*, 13 September 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/15b7036e-7f2d-48d2-8c61-a8163e764377

Adrian Zenz, "Evidence of the Chinese Central Government's Knowledge of and Involvement in Xinjiang's Re-Education Internment Campaign", *China Brief*, 14 September 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/evidence-of-the-chinese-central-governments-knowledge-of-and-involvement-in-xinjiangs-re-education-internment-campaign/

Sacre Bleu! AUKUS agreement and Australian strategic policy
We close this issue with the recently announced Australia-UK-US agreement for cooperation on Australian acquisition of nuclear powered submarines, as well as artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, underwater systems, and long-range strike capabilities. This constitutes a major shift with Canberra abandoning the troubled $90 billion submarine deal with French-owned Naval Group for 12 diesel-electric powered Attack-class submarines in favour of nuclear powered boats either of US Virginia Class or UK Attack class submarines. The operational reasons for this switch, as John Blaxland notes in The Conversation, are straightforward: nuclear powered submarines provide greater range and can stay at sea for longer and "will transform the ability of the Australian Defence Force to operate at range around Australia and beyond". In a strategic context, SSN acquisition in cooperation with the US and UK will also provide RAN with greater interoperability with both partners and redress what Prime Minister Scott Morrison terms the "narrowing" of the "technological edge enjoyed by Australia and our partners" as China expands and modernizes its naval capabilities.

Nonetheless there remain a number of unresolved questions regarding the agreement and its long-term implications at this albeit early stage. Most broadly, as Sam Roggeveen writes at in the Lowy Interpreter, "the real long term of the deal" is that "Australia is gambling that, over the decades-long lifespan of these submarines, the United States will remain committed to its defence and to maintaining a regional presence in the face of the largest

economic and strategic challenge in American history". Economically, the ultimate costs of the SSNs and associated infrastructure remain unclear although it will certainly be some orders of magnitude greater than the outlay for the now-scrapped Naval Group ships given that at present "we do not have the capability in Australia at the moment to operate and maintain nuclear submarines". Sydney Morning Herald political and international editor Peter Hartcher, meanwhile, argues that "Australia can now contemplate another decade or two with no new subs. And even if this proposal goes to plan, Australia will not have a full sovereign capability but an increased defence dependency on the US".

On the non-proliferation front, Prime Minister Morrison was at pains to note that "Australia would not be seeking has no plans to acquire nuclear weapons and this proposal will remain consistent with Australia's longstanding commitment to nuclear non-proliferation". However there remain significant questions about the impact of SSN acquisition on Australian nuclear policy with James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment noting a number of unanswered questions on this score including: what type of nuclear fuel would be used in the submarines; would Australia obtain the fuel through purchase or domestic enrichment; and do we have the requisite scientific capacity to adequately train submariners given we only have one research reactor at Lucas Heights?

Finally, there remains a question mark in some observer's minds about the alignment of the SSN capability with strategy. Respected former US defense official and professor of strategic studies Van Jackson suggests here that while he believes "enmeshing the US with fellow democracies" is a good thing and that Australia "actually needs nuclear-powered subs if it wants to conduct sustainable 'blue water' operations outside its immediate coastal periphery", "this submarine announcement once again puts capability before concept" as "Australia lacks a theory of victory that tells us why the marginal benefit of this specific capability is both worth the cost and better than some alternative capability".