

## *The Listening Post*

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Welcome to Issue 2 of *The Listening Post*, the CDR's monthly digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts published over the course of the month on global, regional and Australian defence and strategic issues. *The Listening Post* provides an easy access repository of articles, commentary and analysis on major defence and strategic policy, and it examines some of the most prominent problems and debates for senior ADF personnel and Defence civilians working on issues related to Australian strategic policy.

### **AUKUS: Analyses and responses**

This month we begin by examining some of the recent writing and commentary on AUKUS from Australia and overseas. Overall responses have been mixed: [Japan](#) and [India](#) have been broadly supportive, [Singapore](#) has been pragmatic, and [Indonesia and Malaysia](#) have voiced concerns. Not surprisingly, [China](#) and [Russia](#) have been the most critical.

Oriana Skylar Mastro and Zack Cooper from the American Enterprise Institute have published a stout defence of AUKUS in the [Lowy Interpreter](#). They argue the deal signals a much-needed strong US commitment to rebalancing in Asia. Noting some of the legitimate criticisms of AUKUS, including over [cost](#), [lead-time](#) and [non-proliferation concerns](#), they nonetheless observe that the deal makes long-term strategic sense given that the US is 'not a resident power' in Asia, and that its 'conventional deterrence against China has eroded'. Furthermore, they foresee AUKUS kickstarting US deep interoperability with like-minded friends and partners in the region, which has often been promised since the end of the Cold War but only infrequently delivered.

Andrew Erickson's essay in [Foreign Policy](#) makes the case for an Australian SSN capability in light of the rising threat environment Australia faces, its alliance posture and Australia's two-ocean footprint. Erickson counts the 'unprecedented Russian assistance to China's own naval nuclear propulsion programs' as a factor that would have concerned decisionmakers in Canberra, as well as the technological edge that an Australian SSN capability would provide in terms of deterrence. Noting also the significant cost overruns of the Shortfin Barracuda deal with France's Naval Group – not to mention the reduction in Australian industry involvement – Erickson sees the deal as a 'no brainer'.

Other responses both at home and abroad have been more critical, and we note a few of the more prominent ones here. Writing for [East Asia Forum](#), Evan Laksmana sees the deal as strategically incoherent, with Canberra's rhetoric on ASEAN centrality not matched by its actions. He notes that championing a trilateral pact of external players increases regional crowding and plays to fears in nations such as Indonesia about the potential for arms races. Until Australia joins up its strategic narratives with its choices, Laksmana argues, the sense of disconnect between Australia and regional actors is unlikely to be resolved.



France, of course, has made its sense of betrayal at the termination of the deal with Naval Group abundantly clear. Most visibly it [withdrew its Ambassadors](#) to Australia and the US and worked to [stymie](#) an Australia-EU Free Trade Agreement. In a piece for [Institut Montaigne](#), one of the most prominent French commentators on strategic affairs, Bruno Tertrais, also expressed his displeasure. He claimed that France must 'bid adieu' to any hopes of joining the Anglosphere, much like its attempts for closer cooperation with the 5 Eyes network were dashed at the end of the 2000s. And while he did not advocate a 'pivot in reverse', Tertrais nonetheless made it clear that France should consider all its regional options, namely: enhancing its strategic cooperation with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam; banking on India as a partner that did not want to see US-China relations slide further towards competition; beefing up its relationship with Japan; and proposing an 'enlarged Quad'.

*Further reading on AUKUS:*

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Daniel Baer, 'Sub Snub Has Paris in a Tizzy over AUKUS', *Foreign Policy*, 17 September, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/17/aukus-france-submarines-australia/>.

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Michael Shoebridge, 'AUKUS kicks Australia's defence transformation into gear', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 19 October, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/aukus-kicks-australias-military-transformation-into-gear/>.

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Caitlin Talmadge, 'Don't Sink the Nuclear Submarine Deal', *Foreign Affairs*, 27 September, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-27/dont-sink-nuclear-submarine-deal>.



Ashley Townshend, 'Far From Breaking with the Past, AUKUS Advances Australia's Commitment to Collective Defence', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 24 September, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/far-from-breaking-with-the-past-aukus-advances-australias-commitment-to-collective-defence/>.

Malcolm Turnbull, 'Address to the National Press Club', 29 September, 2021. <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/address-to-the-national-press-club-september-2021>.

## The Quad Summit

The end of September saw the Quad partners hold their first in-person summit. Expectations were high for the grouping to deliver tangible outcomes to sustain its momentum. Commenting for the [Heritage Foundation](#) prior to the meeting, Jeff Smith called for an ambitious agenda that included recommitting to COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, putting Taiwan on the agenda, considering observer partners for the Malabar exercises, and improving coordination for regional infrastructure-building.

The Quad leader's meeting took place after the [SCO Summit](#) in Tajikistan, which produced some interesting points of difference given that the SCO members predominantly focused on the regional implications of the situation in Afghanistan. In contrast, the Quad leaders' emphasis on climate change, pandemic responses, supply chains and technological cooperation were broader-based, and less overtly devoted to hard security concerns. The [Atlantic Council's](#) Ash Jain called it a strategic success, helping to balance China, and more closely align India with the group. Jain did sound a note of caution, though, commenting that it was necessary to counter the view that the US was sidelining Europe. Meanwhile, Sheila A. Smith's [commentary](#) on the summit for the Council on Foreign Relations stressed that reducing hurdles for cooperation would be a significant challenge, and praised the establishment of a [Quad Fellowship](#) scheme to work on leading technologies.

More critical voices on the summit were also in evidence. They included [Abhijit Singh](#), who claimed the AUKUS announcement a week earlier had taken the sheen of the Quad, which suggested an Anglosphere preference in Washington. Also somewhat implicitly critical was [Griffith University's](#) Ian Hall, who noted that while the Quad is mainly designed to prevent China from establishing a hegemonic order in the Indo-Pacific, questions remain in Southeast Asia about whether it might in fact deepen competition and instability. Finally, a useful mix of positive and more cautious feedback can be found in the US Institute of Peace's [roundtable](#) on the Quad Summit, featuring Dan Markey, Carla Freeman, Brian Harding and others.

### *Further reading and listening on the Quad Summit:*

Hayley Channer, 'Roadmap to Quad Success' Perth US-Asia Centre, September 2021. <https://perthusasia.edu.au/getattachment/cab751b2-3379-4c67-91ef-11c741f71f63/PU-221-IPIS-V16-WEB.pdf.aspx?lang=en-AU>.

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'The Quad Summit with Lavina Lee, Tanvi Madan and Sheila E. Smith' *Lawfare podcast*, 24 September, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lawfare-podcast-quad-summit-lavina-lee-tanvi-madan-and-sheila-smith>.

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White House Press Release on the Quad Summit, 24 September, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>.

### China's G-FOBS test

The People's Republic of China [reportedly tested](#) a Gliding Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (G-FOBS) in August 2021. A FOBS system places a large payload – usually a nuclear one – into a low Earth orbit, which can then be used to attack targets from space. China's test has even been referred to by some commentators as a '[Sputnik moment](#)' for the United States. For an explainer on G-FOBS, and its potential effects, see the piece by [Matthew Sussex and Michael Clarke](#) in *World Politics Review*.

There are two schools of thought on how a Chinese G-FOBS capability affects deterrence and arms control. Writing for *Foreign Policy*, the respected expert [Jeffrey Lewis](#) suggested that it was not at all a surprising development, and actually strengthened deterrence. As Lewis noted 'you can't deter someone from nuking you unless you can nuke them back'. He went on to observe that Russia and China looked at US nuclear forces and asked two questions: 'if the Americans hit us with everything they have, how many of our nuclear weapons will survive to retaliate? How many of those will get through U.S. missile defences?'

On the other side of the coin, a report for [BreakingDefense](#) canvassed some of the reasons why the US security community was so spooked by the Chinese test. It quoted Doug Loverro, the DoD's former head of space policy, who suggested that a FOBS hybrid with a hypersonic glider would make it 'hard to distinguish such a weapon from a typical space launch if an adversary wanted to disguise the true intent'. The same report also quoted the Carnegie Endowment's James Acton, who observed that a hypersonic glider would likely be highly effective at evading missile defences.

#### *Further reading on China and G-FOBS:*

Matthew Sussex and Michael Clarke, 'China's hypersonic missile test could spur a regional arms race', *World Politics Review*, 20 October, 2021. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30052/chinese-missile-test-could-spur-a-regional-arms-race>.

Stephen Reny, "Nuclear-Armed Hypersonic Weapons and Nuclear Deterrence", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 14 (4) (2020), [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-14\\_Issue-4/Reny.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-14_Issue-4/Reny.pdf)

Hans M. Kristensen & Matt Korda, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2020", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 76 (6) (2020),





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Shannon Bugos and Kingston Reiff, *Understanding Hypersonic Weapons: Managing the Allure and the Risks*, (Washington DC: Arms Control Association, Sept 2021),

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Gerald C. Brown, "Understanding the Risks and Realities of China's Nuclear Forces", *Arms Control Today*, June 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-06/features/understanding-risks-realities-chinas-nuclear-forces>

### **Strategic ambiguity and US 'commitments' to defend Taiwan**

Asked during a 'town hall' [event](#) in Baltimore on 22 October whether the US would defend Taiwan if it was attacked by China, US President Joe Biden stated, 'Yes, we have a commitment to do that'. This remark contradicts long-standing US policy on the Taiwan issue. [Some see](#) this as a welcome step to frame US policy vis-à-vis Taiwan by 'strategic clarity' rather than the 'strategic ambiguity' that has defined it for decades. For [others](#) however 'strategic clarity' is unnecessarily provocative as it would effectively extend a security guarantee over a territory that Beijing views as an integral part of its territory, and militarily unsound given [war-gaming](#) that shows American forces suffering significant losses in a [potential](#) war over Taiwan.

The US does not have a clear commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. Since the formal normalization of Sino-US relations in 1979, Washington's position vis-à-vis Taiwan has been guided by the [Taiwan Relations Act \(TRA\)](#). The TRA asserted that while Washington had determined to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is the policy of the United States:

- To preserve and promote extensive relations with the people of Taiwan;
- That peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States;
- That establishment of relations with the PRC rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means;
- That any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means would constitute a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and be of grave concern to the United States.

As a result, the TRA identifies the need 'to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character' and 'to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan'.

The longevity of 'strategic ambiguity' has also been underpinned by the fact that for much of the time since 1979 China did not possess the military capabilities to directly or indirectly coerce Taiwan. That condition has arguably been [reversed](#) by sustained Chinese military modernization and deployment of air, naval and missile capabilities superior to those of Taiwan and the PLA's significant investment in [anti-access/area](#)



denial (A2/AD) capabilities to deter American intervention. Meanwhile, China's serial violations of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the past month, and its long-standing employment of classic 'grey zone' approaches to erode Taiwanese resolve demonstrate its capacity to indirectly coerce Taipei.

Beijing's strategy toward Taiwan is arguably now defined by its manipulation of the deterrence ambiguity that has previously served the US well. China has relied on the US being 'reactive and risk-averse' and has assumed that 'the US will either establish clear escalation thresholds' or 'will try and defuse lower-level provocations from becoming larger conflicts it would rather avoid'.

However, the Biden administration's jettisoning of strategic ambiguity in favour of strategic clarity will not necessarily resolve this dilemma. While a definitive defence commitment to Taiwan "means not only what one is prepared to take a risk for" – e.g. repelling a conventional invasion of Taiwan - it would also provide a clear signal as to "what one would ignore", opening further the potential for Beijing to pursue "grey zone" strategies against Taiwan.

*Further reading on the US and Taiwan:*

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