AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

The Listening Post

Centre for Defence Research
Issue 3, November-December 2021

Welcome to Issue 3 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.

Mixed reactions to the US Global Posture Review

This month we begin by examining some of the recent reactions to the Pentagon's Global Posture Review (GPR). While much of the document remains classified, the publicly released version has elicited some praise for its wholistic approach to US defence commitments worldwide. Closer to home, Australian commentators have approvingly noted the US intention to continue enhancing interoperability with the ADF, as well as pursuing opportunities to improve infrastructure such as airfields.

But a prominent theme of commentary on the GPR has also been disappointment: notably that the document (i) misses an opportunity for the Biden Administration to clearly articulate a strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific; (ii) largely reiterates the status quo; and (iii) offers little that is really new. One of the most critical summaries of the Review has come from Jack Detsch in *Foreign Policy*. Detsch reported on the significant disparagement the document has received on Capitol Hill. He quoted Congressional aides irritated that the GPR seemed to offer 'lots of word salad' and 'almost a year's worth of make-work', along with 'no decisions, no changes, no sense of urgency, no creative thinking'.

Of particular concern has also been the lack of new US deployments in Asia and the Western Pacific to counter an increasingly assertive PLA. Indeed, the Review maintains virtually the same US posture in the Middle East as well as Europe, prompting fears that the Administration is prioritising wishful thinking over the clear need to respond to threats. This seeming failure to prioritise has been reiterated in other commentaries. A number of analysts have articulated the concern that America's second attempt at a pivot to Asia is moving too slowly; kicks the decision-making can down the road to the upcoming National Defence Strategy (NDS) and National Security Strategy (NSS); and reflects a disconnect between the type of global force footprint US policy planners would like to maintain, and what is both required and achievable.

One example here appeared in BreakingDefense, which noted that the GPR did not evaluate space, cyber, or nuclear weapons. Nor did it examine the US ability to fight in multiple theatres. Taking to Twitter, Ashley Townshend from the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney claimed that the GPR contained 'nothing new of significance for the Indo-Pacific', and warned that US global interests would 'continue to crowd out Indo-Pacific priorities.' Townshend called again for the Biden Administration to make the Indo-Pacific

the key focus for the US, a line that the US Studies Centre has been advocating for some time.

A more positive reading of the GPR concerned the clear desire by the US to upgrade infrastructure in partnership with key allies. One report for ABC News quoted Under Secretary of Defense Mara Karlin at length, who observed that 'in Australia, you'll see new rotational fighter and bomber aircraft deployments, you'll see ground forces training and increased logistics cooperation'. In addition, she noted that 'More broadly across the Indo-Pacific, you'll see a range of infrastructure improvements in Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Australia'.

Further reading on the GPR:

Tara Copp, 'US needs Indo-Pacific force "enhancements", Global Posture Review finds', *DefenseOne*, November 29, 2021. https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/11/us-needs-indo-pacific-force-enhancements-global-posture-review-finds/187134/.

Jack Detsch, 'No decisions, no changes: Pentagon fails to stick Asia pivot', *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2021. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/29/pentagon-china-biden-asia-pivot/.

Richard Fontaine, 'What thew new US China focus gets wrong', *Centre for a New American Security*, November 2, 2021. https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/what-the-new-china-focus-gets-wrong.

Gordon Lubold, 'Pentagon plans to improve airfields in Guam and Australia to confront China', *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-pentagon-middle-east-11638142162.

Heather Mongilio, 'Pentagon announces completion of Global Posture Review', *USNI News*, November 29, 2021. https://news.usni.org/2021/11/29/pentagon-announces-completion-of-global-force-posture-review.

Ashley Townshend et al, 'Correcting the course: why the Biden administration should compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific', *US Studies Centre Analysis*, August 27, 2021. https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/correcting-the-course-how-the-biden-administration-should-compete-for-influence-in-the-indo-pacific.

United States Department of Defense, 'DoD concludes 2021 Global Force Posture Review', Press release, November 29, 2021. https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2855801/dod-concludes-2021-global-posture-review/.

Becca Wasser and Rennah M. Joyce, 'All about access: solving America's force posture puzzle', *Washington Quarterly*, September 22, 2021. https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/all-about-access-solving-americas-force-posture-puzzle.

Trouble in the Solomons

Worrying riots in the Solomon Islands capital Honiara during late November have again seen Australia respond to trouble in its backyard with peacekeeping and law enforcement personnel, after intervention by Canberra was requested by Solomons Prime Minister

Manasseh Sogavare. Triggered by dissatisfaction at apparent favouritism by the Sogavare government towards local elites in Guadalcanal, fears about COVID vaccines, and chronic unemployment amongst people from Malaita, the riots killed three people and saw many Chinese-owned businesses burned to the ground in Honiara. The rioters also attempted to attack Prime Minister Sogavare's home. With a total of 116 ADF and AFP personnel, Australia's deployment to secure the capital will augment missions from other Pacific nations, including Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

Australia's swift response has generally been welcomed. But there are some voices of caution. For instance, Richard Herr and Aziz Mohammed have pointed out in the ASPI Strategist that whereas the Australian presence will inject some much-needed stability, it still gives Canberra more ownership of managing unrest in the Solomons than it probably desires. And it will likely mean Australia will continue to be drawn into domestic political manoeuvring in the Solomons. One example was the comment by Daniel Suidani, the Premier of Malaita, that Canberra's intervention was 'not helpful' and that by assisting the unpopular Sogavare was 'holding up a corrupt leadership'. Suidani, who has banned Chinese businesses in Malaita and accepted US development assistance, is certainly a threat to Sogavare's authority. But so too are opposition groups in the Solomons parliament, which launched a no-confidence motion against Sogavare's leadership after four government members resigned. It therefore seems likely that state fragility and weakness will continue in the Solomons. As a result, balancing the need to help maintain order while avoiding being drawn into a longer stabilisation mission will be an ongoing challenge for Australia.

Another development from events in Honiara has been debate over the question of how much effect broader geopolitical competition has played in shaping local conditions. Some commentators have even raised the spectre of Chinese intervention in the event of future unrest. But on both these issues there is general consensus that while Sino-US rivalry has not helped the situation it is not the key driver – and likewise, that the view Beijing may seek to get directly involved in peacekeeping are overblown. In an authoritative piece for *East Asia Forum*, Massey University's noted Pacific affairs expert Anna Powels and Jose Sousa-Santos from the Pacific Security College made it clear that strategic competition 'may have been a spark behind the riots, but it was also a pawn'. The piece went on to note that while attributing unrest in the Solomons to geopolitics was simplistic, it can also signal how strategic competition can reinforce fragility and undermine resilience.

Further reading on instability in the Solomon Islands:

Transform Aqorau, 'Solomon Islands' slippery slope to self-implosion', *DevPolicy*, November 35, 2021. https://devpolicy.org/solomon-islands-slippery-slide-to-self-implosion-20211125/.

Tess Newton Cain, 'As Australia deploys troops and police, what now for Solomon Islands', *The Conversation*, November 26, 2021. https://theconversation.com/as-australia-deploys-troops-and-police-what-now-for-solomon-islands-172678.

Edward Cavanough, 'Does instability in the Solomon Islands mean instability for the region', *The Wire Radio*, November 30, 2021. https://www.thewire.org.au/story/does-instability-in-the-solomon-islands-mean-instability-for-the-region/.

Graham Dobell, 'No short-term solution to Solomon Islands strife', *ASPI Strategist*, November 30, 2021. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/no-short-term-solution-to-solomon-islands-strife/.

Anna Powels and Jose Sousa-Santos, 'Peace unravels in the Solomon Islands', *East Asia Forum*, November 30, 2021. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/30/peace-unravels-in-the-solomon-islands/.

Mihai Sora, 'Dark days for Honiara in the shadow of geopolitics', *Lowy Institute Interpreter*, November 25, 2021. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/dark-days-honiara-shadow-geopolitics. Michael Wesley, 'Reality beyond the whiteboard', *Griffith Review*, no. 16, May 2007. https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/reality-beyond-the-whiteboard/.

Russia tests an ASAT and builds up its forces near Ukraine… again

This month Vladimir Putin's campaign to be taken seriously as a major global player has continued unabated. On November 15 Russia conducted its first ex-atmospheric hit-to-kill test of its *Nudol* ASAT weapon, successfully destroying *Kosmos 1408* (one of its own satellites), and in the process creating a debris field of around 1,500 large pieces. The test required astronauts and cosmonauts aboard the International Space Station (ISS) to initiate emergency procedures, and it resulted in a furious statement from NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, who called it 'unthinkable' as well as 'reckless and dangerous'. Writing for the Carnegie Endowment, Ankit Panda called for the US to lead a global push to ban ASAT tests due to the risk of near-earth collisions. He noted especially that the US had tested its own ASAT capabilities in 2008 and had largely overlooked India's ASAT test in 2019. To de-weaponise space, Panda argued, all major players would need to lead the way on the creation of rules and norm-setting. Yet others were more vocal: the Heritage Foundation's John Venable went further, observing that Russia's ASAT test needed to be viewed in the context of Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, which demanded a robust and 'strategically stabilising' response from the Biden White House.

As if endangering space were not enough, Russia has also been ramping up its troop deployments near Crimea and Donbas, prompting fears that the Kremlin has decided to 'solve' the Ukraine issue more permanently. The NATO foreign ministers' summit in Riga on November 30 issued a call for the Kremlin to de-escalate, and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned Moscow that while Ukraine was not a member of the organisation, and hence outside its Article 5 collective defence agreement, Kiev weas nonetheless a 'highly valued partner'. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, meanwhile, spoke of 'serious consequences' if Russia were to invade Ukraine; while Germany's Heiko Maas stressed that NATO's support for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty were 'not up for discussion'. The summit followed the sensational claim by Ukraine's President Voldymyr Zelensky that Russia was planning a coup in Ukraine, and named the pro-Russian business magnate Rinat Akhmetov as one of the potential plotters.

In addition to the escalation of tensions over Ukraine, the NATO summit considered the activities of Belarus, which – if not with Putin's blessing, then at least his tacit approval – has been engaging in hybrid tactics against NATO member states. This involves allowing prospective migrants to the EU, predominantly from Iraq, Syria and Yemen, to fly to Belarus. Upon arriving, border guards have been transporting the migrants to the Belarusian border with Poland and Lithuania, and herding them across, using laser pointers and lights to blind Polish troops while the Belarusian guards cut holes in wire fences. The resultant human tide has been described by the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki as 'the greatest attempt to destabilise Europe since the Cold War'.

In response to the NATO summit, Vladimir Putin made it clear that Moscow considered the deployment of missile systems in Ukraine that could strike Russia a 'red line'. He went on to note that Russia would be forced to respond to the development of hypersonic weapons, observing 'What should we do? We would need to develop something similar to target those who threaten us. And we can do that even now'.

Russia's repeat tactic of building up troops near Ukraine (which it previously did in April 2021 ahead of its September 2021 *Zapad* exercises) has also reignited debate about whether NATO's response has been strong enough, or whether its claims about defending Ukraine are a transparent bluff. In an op-ed for the *Moscow Times*, the respected analyst Michael Kofman has urged caution, seeing the episode as an attempt at strategic communication by the Kremlin. He argues that Russia's troop movements are highly visible and intended to be seen; that Russia maintains dominant coercive power should it choose to exercise it; and that the conflict cannot be frozen without significant progress towards the Minsk II Agreement. And as Kofman argued in Foreign Affairs a few days earlier, it also signals Russia is not prepared to let Ukraine drift Westward without a fight.

But how to communicate Western displeasure at Putin's regular brinkmanship remains an open question: Max Boot has suggested in a piece for *CFR* that the key is through sanctions on the Nordstream 2 pipeline to put pressure on Russia's pocketbook; Samuel Charap puzzlingly calls the conflict 'Ukraine's border war', and has called for the US to exercise leverage over Kiev to force it to back down over its resistance to the Minsk II agreement; and Eugene Rumer and Andrew Weiss have suggested Putin may be baiting the West into making a Russian invasion justifiable, so caution is necessary. Yet each of these is problematic. First, it is doubtful that the US would be able to suddenly persuade Germany to back tougher sanctions on Nordstream 2. Second, pressuring Ukraine – which faces a coercive Russian troop buildup – smacks of capitulationism, setting a dangerous precedent for other states close to Moscow's geopolitical orbit. And third, while NATO should doubtless be careful not to provide Putin a *casus beli*, it is unclear how the West might moderate bad Russian behaviour on this issue in future.

Further reading on Russia's ASAT test and Ukraine troop buildup:

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig, 'Is Russia preparing to invade Ukraine?', *Foreign Policy*, November 19, 2021. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/19/is-russia-preparing-to-invade-ukraine/.

Emil Avdaliani, 'Ukraine is back on Russia's agenda, *RUSI Commentary*, November 23, 2021. https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-back-russias-agenda.

Max Boot, 'How to energize NATO's response to Russia's threats against Ukraine', *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 19, 2021. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-energize-natos-response-russias-threats-against-ukraine.

Matthieu Boulegue, 'Five lessons from Russia's Ukraine buildup', *Chatham House Explainer*, April 23, 2021. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/five-lessons-russias-ukraine-military-escalation.

Samuel Charap, 'The US approach to Ukraine's border war isn't working: here's what Biden should do instead', *Politico*, November 19, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/11/19/ukraine-russia-putin-border-522989.

Sam Cranny-Evans, 'Russia versus Ukraine: flaws in Western grey zone theories', *RUSI Commentary*, November 24, 2021. https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-vs-ukraine-flaws-western-grey-zone-theories.

Keir Giles, 'What deters Russia', *Chatham House Explainer*, September 23, 2021. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-deters-russia-0.

Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: what drives Russia to confront the West*, London: Chatham House Insights Series, Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

Brandon Kelley and Brian Chow, 'Lessons to learn from Russia's Nudol ASAT test', *Space News*, November 17, 2021. https://spacenews.com/op-ed-lessons-to-learn-from-russias-nudol-asat-test/.

Michael Kimmidge and Michael Kofman, 'Russia won't let Ukraine go without a fight', *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2021. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-11-22/russia-wont-let-ukraine-go-without-fight.

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. 'Secretary-General: NATO stands with Ukraine', NATO press release, November 15, 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_188552.htm.

Steven Pifer, 'Will Putin miscalculate?', *Brookings Institution Centre for International Security and Cooperation*, November 22, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/will-putin-miscalculate/.

Eugene Rumer and Andrew Weiss, ' Ukraine: Putin's unfinished business', *Carnegie Endowment Commentary*, November 11, 2021. https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/12/ukraine-putin-s-unfinished-business-pub-85771.

James Sherr, Keir Giles and Duncan Allan, 'Why myths about Russia are dangerous for policy, *Chatham, House*, May 23, 2021. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/why-myths-about-russia-are-dangerous-policy.

Timothy Wright, 'Russia tests space-based anti-satellite weapon', *IISS Analysis*, September 9, 2020. https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/09/mdi-russia-tests-space-based-anti-satellite-weapon.

'Not now, COVID'

News of the new Omicron variant of COVID has understandably spooked the globe, with concerns that its unprecedented number of mutations (including 30 alone on the spike

protein it uses to bind to human cells) may make it both more transmissible, as well as give it the capacity to escape existing vaccines that were designed around the initial Wuhan variant. But although first indications are that Omicron is not more severe than other COVID variants – and that vaccines should retain some efficacy – it has triggered renewed discussion about the need for a global approach to vaccination. The WHO has been particularly vocal in observing that unless vaccination rates in developing nations rise considerably, the human reservoir for potentially more dangerous and ongoing mutations in the future will mean COVID will remain a threat for the foreseeable future. And while some nations have chosen to capitalise on this (China, for instance, has promised to send one billion more vaccine doses to Africa), how to prevent states from engaging in vaccine nationalism – that is, prioritising their own citizens for vaccines and boosters – is still one of the most vexed questions around the competing pressures on states and leaders in the management of the pandemic.

Further reading on Omicron and vaccine nationalism:

Ingrid T. Katz et al, 'From Vaccine Nationalism to Vaccine Equity: finding a path forward', *New England Journal of Medicine*, April 8, 20201. https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2103614 Sarah Vanderslott et al, 'Vaccine nationalism and internationalism: perspectives of COVID-19 vaccine trial participants in the United Kingdom', *British Medical Journal Global Health*, 202, 2021. https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/10/e006305.

James Darwin N Lagman, Vaccine nationalism: a predicament in ending the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 43, Issue 2, June 2021, Pages e375–e376. https://academic.oup.com/jpubhealth/article/43/2/e375/6175261.

Steven Lee Myers, 'The WHO skips forward two Greek letters, avoiding a Xi variant', *New York Times*, November 27, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/28/world/asia/omicron-variant-name-covid.html.

Colm Quinn, 'We Don't Know Much About Omicron', *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2021. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/29/omicron-variant-south-africa-travel-bans/.

'Xi Jinping pledges a billion more vaccine doses for Africa in the wake of Omicron', *Time*, 29 November, 2021. https://time.com/6124584/china-vaccines-africa-omicron/.