

The Listening Post

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Welcome to Issue 11 of *The Listening Post*, the CDR's regular digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts 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 issues. 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.

In this special edition we recap some of the most important developments we have tracked in *The Listening Post* this year and our most-read themes.

On behalf of everyone at CDR, we hope you have been enjoying *The Listening Post*, and that you are able to take a relaxing and enjoyable break. We will be recharging ourselves too, but look forward to delivering you more debates and discussions around important issues affecting Australian defence and strategy in the new year. See you in 2023.

NATO–US–Russia talks and Ukraine

From Issue 4, January 2022

Yep, we called the war then

[Rapid-fire talks](#) involving Russia and a variety of transatlantic players were held in mid-January. These were aimed at de-escalating the worsening security situation between Moscow and Kiev, after Russia embarked on a massive build-up of military personnel – effectively an invasion force of [100,000 personnel](#) – near the border with Ukraine. The talks were also prompted by a [list of demands](#), which included a pledge from NATO to not admit Ukraine to the alliance or supply them with offensive weapons. High-level meetings were held in Brussels ahead of the Russia-NATO summit as well as OSCE meetings on the conflict in Ukraine, led on the US side by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and on the Russian side by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

As has become axiomatic with [NATO Russia dialogue](#), the negotiations predictably failed to yield anything even close



to a breakthrough. Both sides stuck to their talking points, making them little more than extended public relations exercises that likely profited the Kremlin more, given they were held as a direct result of the Russian military build-up in the first place. But they did make it clear Moscow wants the question of Ukraine's security preferences – as well as the broader question of NATO expansion – resolved once and for all. In doing so, the Kremlin is seeking to replace the existing security order in Eastern and Central Europe with a [familiar delineation, where](#) NATO members are on one side and those states in the former Soviet orbit on the other.

This has been a central goal of Russian foreign policy for at least the last 25 years, but it is less obvious whether Vladimir Putin genuinely thinks he can accomplish it with the West's acquiescence. While he certainly believes the ongoing domestic political turmoil in the US has made the Biden administration [weak](#), and that the [schisms within the EU](#) make a tougher united transatlantic approach to Russian brinkmanship a non-starter, it would be stretching credibility to suggest Kremlin elites believe they will be able to successfully upend the European security order.

This in turn raises a couple of important questions: what is Putin's endgame, and how is the West going to try and prevent Moscow from being anything other than encouraged by its attempts to generate concessions through the threat of invading Ukraine? On the issue of what the West does next, it is becoming increasingly evident that relying on sanctions and half-hearted resets with Russia [are ineffective](#). That presents a problem to NATO: in effect, its attempts to deter Russia from seeking to dominate the former Soviet security space are less than credible. That means at some stage it will need to choose between firmly backing Kyiv with both hardware and political capital, or concede to Russian pressure. Both are risky, because the first option will commit NATO to a de facto security guarantee for Ukraine (something the majority of its members have no stomach for); while the second would make NATO's statements on countering bad behaviour by Moscow little more than a bluff.

So what is Putin's [endgame](#) in all this? His brinkmanship in Ukraine offers a number of lessons. First, he seems more willing to risk war than NATO. Second, he uses escalation control as a strategic instrument, betting that the NATO response will be to seek a diplomatic solution to his moves. Third, he consistently seeks to learn from Western responses through a series of [tests](#): of the Biden Administration's resolve; of US influence over its European NATO partners; of the depth of transatlantic unity; and of the extent to which he can identify and manipulate differences of opinion within the alliance to extract concessions. Worryingly, on each of those measures Russian tactics appear to be working. This can only underscore the urgent need for a much tighter transatlantic response to Russia in the near future.

Further reading

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The US Nuclear Posture Review

From Issue 4, January 2022

This month brings news about the Biden administration's forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which is expected to be released in February. Through the NPR, the Biden administration, like all new administrations, will provide answers to a number of core questions with respect to US nuclear posture: should it change employment guidance for the nuclear arsenal; should it adjust force size and/or composition; and should it adjust US declaratory policy?

Of course, the Biden administration does not start with a blank slate but rather must choose which elements of nuclear posture bequeathed by previous administrations to keep, renovate, or discard. The most fundamental question for the Biden team concerns the purpose of the US nuclear arsenal. American nuclear forces for many years have been designed to achieve multiple objectives: deterring nuclear attack against the US and/or allies (and responding should deterrence fail); deterring conventional war with great power adversaries (for example, 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 its undertaking of nuclear arms control with Russia and President Obama'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 – for example, in response to a never defined concept of a 'non-nuclear strategic attack'. The Trump administration also committed to not only continue the modernisation of the '[nuclear triad](#)' but also to develop new types of warheads, particularly 'low-yield' SLBMs and sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs).

Given the political and rhetorical distinctions between the Biden administration and its predecessor, many are expecting significant change in American nuclear posture. Yet, recent [reporting](#) on administration deliberations on the NPR suggests change may be less than dramatic and focus on the elimination of the Trump-era 'add-ons' (such as the 'low-yield' SLBMs) to nuclear arsenal modernisation. The one area however, in which the administration may make significant change regards declaratory policy. Some punditry has [focused](#) on the [pros](#) and [cons](#) of a potential 'no first use' (NFU) declaration. But, that now appears to be a bridge too far and the administration may opt instead for the adoption of a 'sole use' posture – i.e. a clear statement in the NPR that the sole use of the US nuclear arsenal is to deter or respond to the use of nuclear weapons by others.

This would be in keeping with Biden's views when he was Vice-President under Obama and with his commitment coming into the White House to reduce US reliance on nuclear weapons. Yet, as [Adam Mount](#) of the Federation of American Scientists notes, Biden's ability to affect such change is circumscribed by 'concerted opposition from partisan opponents and Pentagon officials, structural impediments to the president's ability to shift policy, and the failure of political appointees to learn the lessons of past attempts'. Indeed, in the midst of the administration's deliberations on the NPR, it has been the subject of public attacks by [Republican](#) representatives and former Trump administration [officials](#), who have [disingenuously](#) conflated 'sole use' with NFU. Meanwhile, senior Pentagon officials,

such head of Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richard, have publicly [stated](#) that the purpose of the administration's NPR should in fact be 'validation, that we like the strategy we have'.

Beyond such classic bureaucratic political struggles, the Biden NPR will also have to grapple with the dilemma of balancing its apparent commitment to lessening reliance on nuclear weapons in US security policy with the realities of the arms racing [incentives](#) provided by increased strategic competition with China and Russia.

Here, the offence–defence balance – i.e. the relative ease of undertaking defence or attack given other prevailing conditions – is arguably in play. The offence–defence balance [comprises](#) three elements: the technical basis of relative military advantage; the relative availability of military resources; and strategic beliefs that underpin a power's relative concern for reputation and/or credibility.

The Pentagon's 'China Military Power Report' of [November 2021](#), for example, illustrated the nature of some of these challenges. It noted new developments in China's nuclear forces and posture and its deployment of new missile systems – such as a [Gliding Fractional Orbital Bombardment System](#) (G-FOBS) – suggest Beijing is intent on reducing the vulnerability of its nuclear deterrent to a US first-strike and countering the potential effects of US ballistic missile defence (BMD).

Thus, a classic offence–defence arms racing dynamic looks set to play out in Sino-US relations. Given technological developments – most particularly hypersonics – and the limited effectiveness of existing BMD systems, [Steven Pifer](#) notes 'offense will win the strategic offense–defense competition' as adversaries 'can increase the number of strategic warheads and decoys at far less cost' than would be required to increase the effectiveness of BMD. Indeed, as [General John Hyten](#), Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated on 13 September 2021, 'The defensive capabilities that we have been building tend to be very cost prohibitive on us ... And when our interceptor costs more than the weapon attacking us, that's a bad place to be'.

Despite this, it nonetheless [appears](#) that the Biden administration – like its immediate predecessors – is committed to further development of BMD technology. The administration, for instance, has 'fast tracked' the US\$18 billion '[Next Generation Interceptor](#)' program, which is to replace the current ground-based interceptors within the US and is designed to counter ICMBs and hypersonic missiles.

More broadly, the administration has signalled its commitment to the continued modernisation of the US nuclear triad (i.e. nuclear capable bombers, ICBMs and SLBMs). Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, [Colin Kahl](#), noted in June 2021 that 'we need to have a modernised triad as a hedge against an uncertain technological future, but one where we expect our adversaries to be quite competitive and building up their own capabilities'.

Kahl indicated what the biggest difference between the forthcoming Biden NPR and that of the Trump administration would be when he noted that Biden's would be explicitly [guided](#) by the question of 'what types of threats are nuclear weapons well-suited to actually deter'. Trump's 2018 NPR asserted that nuclear weapons could be used not only in their traditional role to deter or respond to nuclear use by a great power adversary but also in response to any actor that 'supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain nuclear devices' or attacks on 'civilian population or infrastructure'. In contrast, Biden's NPR looks set to make good on the President's rhetorical commitment to narrow the situations in which the US would consider nuclear use.

Further reading

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Kim Jong-un kickstarting new brinkmanship on the Korean Peninsula?

From Issue 5, February–March 2022

In late February the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) conducted two ballistic missile tests. [According](#) to a senior US official, 'the US government has concluded that the DPRK's two ballistic missile tests...involved a relatively new intercontinental ballistic missile system that the DPRK is developing'. This comes on the back of a marked increase in DPRK weapons testing. January 2022, in particular, [saw](#) DPRK undertake two hypersonic missile tests, multiple short, medium and intermediate range missile tests, and a number of cruise missile tests. Additionally, as Jeffrey Lewis [noted](#) on 7 March, there are also indications of new construction activities at DPRK's nuclear testing site, Punggye-ri. One possibility for this is: 'North Korea plans to bring the test site back to a state of readiness to resume nuclear explosive testing, consistent with the statement North Korea issued in January to "examine the issue of restarting all temporarily-suspended activities"..'.

Some have [speculated](#) that DPRK supreme leader, Kim Jong-un (KJU), is experiencing relevance-deprivation syndrome and is simply seeking to remind the world, and the US in particular, that DPRK remains a power to be taken seriously. In this latter context, the increase in DPRK testing may be a gambit to compel the Biden administration to re-engage with Pyongyang. While former President Donald Trump infamously enthused that he and KJU '[fell in love](#)' during US-DPRK talks in 2018, his successor has thus far proved to be a less willing suitor. The Biden administration's DPRK policy review, completed in April 2021, in fact pointedly [adopted](#) what was termed a 'calibrated and practical' approach that, in President Biden's words, would be [based](#) on 'stern diplomacy and deterrence'.

With many other pressing issues – including Russia's invasion of Ukraine – landing on the White House in-tray, it is perhaps unsurprising that DPRK has slipped down in the administration's priorities. Yet, some observers have [suggested](#) this could be a good thing as the 'US has little incentive to give in to the DPRK's demands'. By demonstrating the continued development of DPRK missile capabilities, however, KJU may be attempting to disabuse the administration of this assumption.

Another broader consideration that may lie behind these DPRK activities could be KJU's perception of the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US-led response. Here, there are at least two potential considerations at play for KJU. First, Putin's aggression against Ukraine [is](#) 'likely perceived as

another cautionary tale by Pyongyang—a lesson on what happens to states without nuclear weapons in the face of conflict with more powerful nuclear-armed adversaries’. Second, KJU may also perceive the evident deterioration of US relations with both Russia and China as providing an [advantageous](#) moment to renew DPRK missile, and potentially, nuclear weapon testing. Not only is the Biden administration distracted responding to the Ukrainian situation, but Beijing may be amenable to shielding Pyongyang from any pressure applied by the US and its allies.

An alternate view, however, is that KJU’s renewed brinkmanship is largely irrelevant, as it does little to change the strategic balance. Here, not only does American conventional and nuclear capability dwarf anything Pyongyang can muster but also its cycles of missile (and nuclear) testing have spurred Japan and South Korea to deploy missile defence systems. Thus, as [Denny Roy](#) asserts, while improvements in DPRK missile capabilities ‘reinforce North Korea’s deterrence against the U.S. or South Korea launching a discretionary war of regime change’, they ultimately ‘do not give Pyongyang a first-strike capability. In short, the missile upgrades matter little, so they confer little leverage’.

Further reading

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Resources on Putin’s invasion of Ukraine

From Issue 5, February–March 2022

Obviously – due to the nature of the war – information on the progress of the conflict in Ukraine is ever-changing. Twitter is probably the best (and at the same time probably the worst!) resource for up-to-the-minute information on the conflict. Below we have put together a compendium of resources that include (i) reporting on recent developments in the war; (ii) examinations of broader geopolitical and economic implications; and (iii) resources with an Australian strategic policy flavour. We have largely avoided Russian sources, which are really only useful for either shock or comedy value, with the exception of those seen as authoritative and generally as independent as possible. Some Ukrainian resources are included: claims made here should always be independently confirmed before being treated as authoritative.

Regular updates about developments in the war

We recommend Michael Kofman (@KofmanMichael) for his informative assessments of Russian and Ukrainian performance and strategy. For astonishingly regular updates on war damage, videos from citizen reporters and commentary on the war, Rob Lee (@RALee85) is also worth following. The former and recently retired COMADC, MAJGEN Mick Ryan (@warinthefuture) has been putting out daily situation updates, with detailed analysis of the progress of Russian forces, in particular. Meanwhile, urban warfare specialist John Spencer (@SpencerGuard) has been in high demand, even tweeting tips to Ukrainian forces about how best to harass and delay advancing Russian forces in cities and towns.

For news out of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, especially focusing on the human cost, the Australian war correspondent for the Australian Financial Review, Misha Zelinsky (@mishazelinsky), has been reporting tirelessly on the war from Lviv. His podcast @DiplomatesShow is also worth a listen. Less consistently accurate but certainly ubiquitous are the Kyiv Independent (@KyivIndependent) and NEXTA (@nexta_tv). Others – who can be the first to break news but are also sometimes incorrect – include ELINT News (@ELINTNews), OSINT Defender (@OSINTDefender), and Ukraine Weapons Tracker (@Uaweapons).

We recognise naturally that there are many other sources out there. These are just our personal suggestions.

Examinations of the broader geopolitical/economic situation

Staying with Twitter we recommend the following for assessments of geopolitics, great power relations, economic impacts, law, cyber and other related topics.

Ian Bond (@CER_IanBond)	Shashank Joshi (@shashj)	Michael Weiss (@michaeldweiss)
Natasha Kuhrt (@Nkurht)	Nigel Gould-Davis (@Nigelgd1)	Jade McGlynn (@jademcglynn122)
Sergei Radchenko (DrRadchenko)	Keir Giles (@KeirGiles)	Ruth Deyermond (@ruth_deyermond)
Seva Gunitsky (@SevaUT)	Ben Noble (@Ben_H_Noble)	

News services and analysts reporting on Russia that are constantly struggling with Kremlin bans include:

Meduza Project (@meduza_en)	Dmitri Trenin (@DmitriTrenin)	Alexander Gabuev (@AlexGabuev)
Max Seddon (@maxseddon)	Anton Barbashin (@Abarbashin)	

Some of these can at times reflect sanitised or ‘official’ positions.

Oh, and for satire in these dark times we wholeheartedly recommend Darth Putin (@DarthPutinKGB).

Meanwhile, the list of Australian voices with a degree of knowledge or expertise on Russia who are tweeting on the war includes and among many others, of course.

Linda Mottram (@LindaMottram)	Stephen Dziezic (@stephendziezic)
Robert Horvath (@RGHorvath)	Will Partlett (@Wpartlett)
And, shameless plug here! Matthew Sussex (@matthew_sussex)	

Resources with an Australian / Indo-Pacific strategic policy flavour

Although some of the accounts above also examine this theme, there are some following the war with a specific focus on Australia, Asia and/or the Indo-Pacific. They include:

Another shameless plug here. Michael Clarke (@meclarke114)	John Blaxland (@JohnBlaxland1)
Van Jackson (@WonkVJ)	Malcolm Davis (Dr_M_Davis)
Ashley Townshend (@ashleytownshend)	Ian Hall (@DrlanHall)
Nick Bisley (@NickBisley)	Liz Buchanan (@BuchananLiz)

Writing on the Russian invasion

There are an awfully large number of hot takes, lukewarm takes and other earnest writings on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of them are worthwhile, but almost all will have a limited shelf life. Hence, here we try and cut through the chaff by focusing on key debates that will have relevance to Europe, Asia and Australia beyond the a few weeks.

On the capabilities of Russia's military

Isaac Chotiner, 'The Russian military's debacle in Ukraine', *New Yorker*, 11 March 2022.
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Helene Cooper et al., 'As Russia's military stumbles, its adversaries take note', *New York Times*, 7 March 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/us/politics/russia-ukraine-military.html>.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/russian-military-power-weakness-ukraine/623323/>.

The Economist, 'The curious case of Russia's Missing Air Force', *Economist*, 8 March 2022.
<https://www.economist.com/interactive/2022/03/08/curious-case-russias-missing-air-force>.

On the risks of a wider war with NATO (including debate over a No-Fly Zone)

Nigel Gould-Davies, 'Putin's strategic failure and the risk of escalation', *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 1 March 2022.
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Robin Wright, 'The growing fear of a wider war between Russia and the West', *New Yorker*, 10 March 2022.
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On giving Putin an 'off-ramp'

Eric Sand and Suzanne Freeman, 'The Russian sanctions regime and the risks of catastrophic success', *War on the Rocks*, 8 March 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-russian-sanctions-regime-and-the-risk-of-catastrophic-success/>.

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Jane Vaynman and Tristan A Volpe, 'Making coercion work', *War on the Rocks*, 11 March 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/making-coercion-work-against-russia/>.

On China's role in the conflict

Joseph Torigian, 'China's balancing act on Russian invasion of Ukraine explained' *The Conversation*, 11 March 2022. <https://theconversation.com/chinas-balancing-act-on-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-explained-178750>.

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On lessons (if any) for future conflict in Taiwan

Bonnie Glaser and Jude Blanchette, 'Ukraine war should counsel Chinese caution on Taiwan', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 March 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-war-chinese-caution-taiwan-russia-china-putin-xi-jinping-invasion-sovereignty-11646769700>.

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US National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review

From Issue 5, April 2022

On 29 March, the Pentagon submitted its much-anticipated National Defense Strategy (NDS) to Congress, with Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, [tweeting](#) that an unclassified version would be released publicly in ‘coming months’. The NDS is the Pentagon’s ‘capstone strategic guidance’ and lays out how it will implement the Biden administration’s broader national security strategy initially sketched in the [Interim National Security Strategy](#) of March 2021. This iteration of the NDS is significant for three reasons.

1. It comes amidst major war in Europe and heightened concern by the US (and allies) of growing alignment between Russia and China.
2. There remain enduring concerns that the defence budget is driven by individual service prerogatives rather than coherent strategy.
3. DoD’s other strategic review documents, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and Missile Defense Review (MDR) will for the first time be integrated into the 2022 NDS.

Even though the NDS has not been publicly released, it is nonetheless clear that it will be framed by two dominant challenges: China and deterrence. On the first issue, the two-page ‘fact sheet’ on the NDS [released](#) by DoD as it sent the classified document to Congress reveals that despite Russian armed aggression in Europe the Biden administration, no doubt to the relief of some US allies in Asia, will prioritise countering Chinese ambitions. The fact sheet identifies five priorities for the Pentagon. ‘[D]efending the homeland, paced to the growing multidomain threat posed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’ topped a list rounded out by: ‘deterring strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners’; ‘deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary’; prioritising the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe’; and ‘building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem’.

That countering the perceived challenge from China would be prioritised is no surprise given the centrality of China to the March 2021 Interim National Security Guidance and the largely bipartisan [consensus](#) that the US and China are locked into ‘strategic competition’ for the foreseeable future, which has emerged in Washington over recent years. As [many](#) have argued, however, ‘strategic competition’ offers neither a clear guide to identifying the precise nature of China’s challenge to the US nor a blueprint for how best to respond. Rather, it has to date served as a catch-all term under which to place all manner of real and perceived Chinese threats to US security, from unfair trade practices to information and influence operations.

A major danger here, as Anthony Cordesman writing on the FY2022 defense budget request noted, is that such ‘broad strategic rhetoric’ generally [fails](#) to translate into tangible plans, programs, and budgets’. And, it provides ‘little more than generic rhetoric about overall strategy with no supporting explanation or justification of how strategy is to be implemented by region or key area of focus’.

This appears to be compounded, Kori Schake [argues](#), by the fact that the administration has submitted its FY2023 Defense budget [request](#) of \$813 billion without a ‘well ordered process’ whereby the NDS would be derived from a coherent National Security Strategy (NSS). It is ‘thereby narrowing the focus to how the Department of Defense plans to use its civilian and military resources’ to carry out the NSS. Such documents ‘should inform the budget’ but ‘none of them is yet completed, except for interim guidance for preparation of the national security strategy’.

The NDS fact sheet arguably provides little comfort on this particular front. Indeed, the Pentagon's strategy to counter what it terms the US's 'most consequential strategic competitor' (i.e. China) appears at risk of emerging as a damp squib.

As foreshadowed in a number of [statements](#) by DoD officials ([including](#) Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin) since the Biden administration took office, one of the organising concepts upon which US defense strategy will rest is 'integrated deterrence'. The NDS factsheet notes that it will seek to achieve the five objectives noted above in 'three primary ways: integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages'. How these are defined is worth quoting [verbatim](#) as it demonstrates the privileging of aspirational verbiage over precise calibration of means and ends.

'Integrated deterrence' has been defined previously, with Secretary of Defense Austin [offering](#) the following definition last year:

integrated deterrence means using every military and nonmilitary tool in our toolbox in lockstep with our allies and partners. Integrated deterrence is about 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.

The NDS fact sheet now defines the concept 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.

This, according to Deputy Secretary of Defense, [Kathleen Hicks](#), will enable the US to make the 'costs and folly of aggression very clear'. However, it is not at all apparent how integrated deterrence will function, what capabilities are required and what might be the role of allies/partners in this enterprise.

The notion of 'campaigning' is even vaguer. According to the fact sheet, 'campaigning' will:

strengthen deterrence and enable us to gain advantages against the full range of competitors' coercive actions. The United States will operate forces, synchronise broader Department efforts, and align Department 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.

This however, tells us precisely nothing about what 'campaigning' actually is.

'Building enduring advantages', in turn, 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.

In plain language, this amounts to a sensible focus on the material and human elements of capability acquisition and development necessary to counter perceived challenges/threats.

Yet despite such imprecise language, we can suggest that the administration appears to be moving towards what Frank Hoffman [describes](#) as an explicit 'whole of government' deterrence approach that seeks to integrate the US's military and nonmilitary capabilities to alter an adversary's calculus about the benefits and costs of using coercion, including military force.

The NPR and MDR [fact sheet](#), in contrast, offers some clearer indications as to the direction of US policy on nuclear doctrine and missile defense strategy and confirms some early assessments on the direction of the NPR that we noted in the [January 2022 Listening Post](#).

As we noted then, Joe Biden's stated support – as both [Vice President](#) under President Obama (2009–2016) and as a presidential [candidate](#) in 2020 – for a 'no first use' (NFU) declaration had prompted much punditry regarding the pros and cons of such an undertaking. Such speculation now appears moot as the factsheet confirms the administration *will not* enunciate a NFU commitment whereby the US would only countenance use of nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack. Rather, the factsheet states that the President's vision for 'US nuclear deterrence strategy' is underpinned by the consideration that:

as long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of US nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners. The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Celeste Wallander, under questioning from the Armed Services Committee on 30 March [asserted](#) clearly that this language '*does not* apply exclusively to nuclear attack but extends to *extreme circumstances* that would require the United States to defend allies and partners'.

The factsheet also indicates the administration's desire to walk back some of the Trump administration's 2018 NPR. The 2018 NPR, for instance, was generally [considered](#) by experts to broaden rather than narrow the circumstances under which the United States would consider nuclear use – for example in response to a never defined concept of a 'non-nuclear strategic attack' - and committed the US to not only continued modernisation of the 'nuclear triad' but to develop new types of warheads, particularly 'low-yield' SLBMs and sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). The Biden administration's NPR, in contrast, 'underscores our commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons and re-establishing our leadership in arms control' and will seek 'to emphasise strategic stability, seek to avoid costly arms races, and facilitate risk reduction and arms control arrangements where possible'.

An early indication that the administration may make good on at least some of these objectives is its [cancellation](#) of the SLCM program for which the US Navy had requested \$15.2 million 'to begin research and development activities' and 'an accompanying nuclear warhead' in 2021. Like all preceding administrations' efforts to refine US nuclear policy, the Biden administration's looks set to be constrained by the interplay between domestic politics, bureaucratic politics and geopolitical realities. Indeed, while the cancellation of the SLCM program is likely to be seen as a gesture to 'progressives' in his own party who want movement on cuts to both defense expenditure and the US nuclear arsenal, Biden's decision appears to cut against the advice of the US military itself. Under questioning on the SLCM program by the Armed Services Committee on 30 March, General Tod Wolters (US European Command Commander and NATO Supreme Allied Commander), [agreed](#) with the proposition that it would be his 'best military advice that we continue the development of that particular option', as the US needs to develop as many options as possible to 'exacerbate the challenges for the potential enemies against us'.

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The PRC-Solomon Islands security deal

From Issue 6, April 2022

A leaked draft of an official document in late March contained some disturbing news for Australian national security watchers: the Solomon Islands looked to be on the verge of agreeing to a [framework](#) whereby the PRC could station significant military forces in the Pacific nation. According to the text of the agreement, which covered domestic instability as well as maritime security, the PLA would gain the ability not just to safeguard Chinese interests in the Solomons, but potentially use them as a pretext for larger deployments. Specifically, this applied in three areas of the agreement:

- First, the agreement states that Beijing would be able to deploy forces to 'protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in the Solomon Islands'.
- It then goes on to state that the Solomon Islands may 'request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces'.
- Finally, the draft agreement states that the Solomons will permit China to 'make ship visits, to carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transit'.

The development is particularly concerning given it comes on the back of the deployment of Chinese police to the Solomon Islands after recent [anti-government riots](#), and the shipment of [replica rifles](#) by the Chinese Embassy in Honiara, as part of a training program for local law enforcement officers. It also indicates that Chinese influence has continued to grow following the decision by the Solomon Islands government in 2019 to [switch its recognition](#) of China from the ROC (Taiwan) to the PRC. Following that decision, Chinese investment has helped to restart gold mines, build port infrastructure and launch other construction projects in and around Honiara.

The Australian government has reacted quickly, sending Paul Symon (the head of ASIS) as well as ONI Director-General Andrew Shearer to meet with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and convey Canberra's concerns. But despite [assuring](#) them that Australia remained the Solomons' 'partner of choice', Sogavare gave no hint that he was intending to walk back the deal with Beijing.

The deal has several implications for Australia. The first of these is [strategic](#): the establishment of Chinese military facilities in the Solomons would allow for a range of capabilities in Australia's immediate geopolitical environment. These include extended signals intelligence gathering, the ability to make it more difficult for US naval forces to move closer to China, and the potential capacity to stage hybrid fleets. The proposed deal prompted [Admiral Samuel Paparo](#), the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, to call Chinese activity in the region 'concerning', going on to note that it raised the likelihood of military hostilities in the Indo-Pacific significantly.

A second implication of the deal with the Solomons is political and reputational. Although Canberra has made much of its 'Pacific Step-Up' and notions of a 'Pacific Family', a number of commentators across the ideological spectrum have argued that Australia has neglected the region for decades, and diplomatic relations with regional governments have stagnated. In other words, Australia only has [itself to blame](#) for China muscling in on the region. Here, ASPI's [Peter Jennings](#) has claimed that Australia

does 'not have a close or privileged relationship' with most nations in the South Pacific. Noting that Australia is the Solomon Islands' 13th largest trading partner (China is first), Jennings goes on to argue for much deeper Australian strategic investment in addition to higher defence spending. Others, like [Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles](#), agree with the notion of 'benign neglect', but have suggested a different and more diplomatic approach, whereby Australia talks 'to' Pacific Island nations rather than 'at' them.

Whatever comes of the relationship between Honiara and Beijing, it seems likely that there will continue to be recriminations. One contribution, for example, has [charged](#) that Sogavare has betrayed other Pacific nations by inviting geopolitical competition into the region, which is against the spirit of the Boe Declaration. But another intervention, from [David Hundt and Simon Hewes](#), has suggested instead that the gains Australia has received from investment in the Pacific are actually relatively limited. They see Canberra's commitment to the region, and its emphasis on Chinese ambitions through 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy as the product of fear and anxiety rather than opportunity. And whereas, it is clearly too soon to tell how much Chinese influence will translate into strategic heft, we should not discount these counterpoints to the more conventional assessments coming out of Australia's national security community.

US commitment to Taiwan: is 'strategic ambiguity' on life support?

From Issue 7, May 2022

During his visit to Japan, US President Joe Biden made another statement on US commitment to Taiwan that suggested a major shift in US policy. When asked during a [joint](#) press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio whether he was 'willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan', Biden responded in the affirmative, before noting 'that's the commitment we made'. As numerous commentators have pointed out, however, the US does not have a formal commitment to defend Taiwan. In fact, a treaty-based commitment was scrapped in 1979 with the normalisation of relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was replaced by the signing of the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) that obligates the US to equip Taiwan to defend itself.

This is at [least](#) the third time in under a year that Biden has made similar statements on his belief in a US commitment to ensure, in [his](#) words, that there 'is no unilateral change to the status quo' by China. Biden's remarks were, as with previous ones, quickly walked back by administration officials. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin [noted](#) that the President had simply 'highlighted our commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to help provide Taiwan the means to defend itself'. Austin's comments were arguably an effort to reaffirm that the administration continues to abide by the policy of 'strategic ambiguity' on Taiwan (i.e. ensuring that neither Beijing nor Taipei can be certain of US involvement in the event of a cross-Strait conflict), which successive administrations have followed since 1979.

Although there has been a [tendency](#) to dismiss this as another instance of Biden going 'off script', the fact that it has recurred repeatedly suggests a shift in policy. Indeed, Biden's statements on Taiwan, as Stephen Wertheim has [noted](#), 'is opening space to attack the status quo' of 'strategic ambiguity' in Washington. This space has arguably been widening over the past five years, as a result of concerns about a shifting military balance across the Taiwan Strait and the solidification of 'strategic competition' between Washington and Beijing.

As such, Biden's assertions on a US commitment to defend Taiwan strengthens a pre-existing trajectory towards Washington jettisoning 'strategic ambiguity' for 'strategic clarity'. The Trump administration prepared the ground here, through a number of developments including:

- the [Taiwan Travel Act](#) of March 2018, which permits US officials travelling to Taiwan and meeting with Taiwanese counterparts
- [Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative](#) (TAIPEI), designed to assist Taiwan in maintaining existing diplomatic relations
- the passing of the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (2020), which affirmed that the US would 'strengthen defense and security cooperation with Taiwan to support the development of capable, ready, and modern defense forces'.

It is unsurprising, then, that Biden's various comments alluding to a direct commitment to come to Taiwan's aid should China seek 'reunification' through military means have drawn support from [both](#) Republican and Democratic lawmakers. The chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Menendez, and ranking Republican member of that committee, Michael McCaul, for example, [both](#) voiced strong support for the President's latest 'clarity' on Taiwan.

The rationale of [advocates](#) of 'strategic clarity' is straightforward: given that 'the odds of a Chinese blockade, missile strike, or invasion grow with each passing year', *only* a clear and definitive statement of US intention and resolve will 'dissuade' China from 'miscalculation'. Yet, as [we](#) and [others](#) have argued elsewhere, greater certainty regarding US intentions is not what has kept a lid – however, imperfectly – on this potential flashpoint since 1979. Rather, the relative success of 'strategic ambiguity' has been based on what [Richard Bush](#) characterised as 'dual deterrence' – i.e. the simultaneous manipulation of uncertainty of American commitments to Taiwan and assurances to Beijing that Washington would neither recognise Taiwan as sovereign state nor support moves towards independence.

The dilemma confronting the Biden administration now is that the conditions that made this approach sustainable – i.e. American military superiority and bipartisan consensus on China policy – have changed. China's military modernisation – including significant investment in [anti-access/area denial](#) (A2/AD) capabilities – has [overcome](#) the historical weakness of its conventional capabilities vis a vis the US and Taiwan, while its use of 'grey zone' [approaches](#) (e.g. its [serial violations](#) of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone) to [erode](#) Taiwanese resolve demonstrate its capacity to indirectly coerce Taipei. Meanwhile, the [chances](#) of 'Taiwan initiating a conflict, as past American administrations might have worried about when the island was under one-party rule and China was poor and weak, are now vanishingly small'.

Given that President Biden has now stated his belief in a US commitment to Taiwan's defence multiple times, there is a [case](#) to be made that 'Biden means exactly what he says when it comes to Taiwan'. A crucial problem here, however, is this apparent slide towards 'strategic clarity' arguably creates the conditions under which deterrence will fail. To succeed, as [Thomas Schelling](#) famously argued, deterrence requires *both* the credible ability to punish or deny a potential aggressor and a credible assurance to the aggressor that its most feared outcome will not occur. On each count, there is reason to question Washington's ability to attain both of these conditions on its current policy trajectory.

Militarily, as a recent RAND study [concludes](#), the US would face great difficulty in combating a Chinese economic blockade of Taiwan let alone a full-scale invasion, due in no small measure to the PLA's acquisition and [deployment](#) of new precision strike capabilities. Diplomatically, Biden's repeated statements that it will support Taiwan militarily combined with recent US [efforts](#) to enlist its Asian allies in this cause will arguably raise the spectre in Beijing of a [worst-case scenario](#), in which the US not only definitively abrogates the 'One China policy' but solidifies a strategic 'encirclement' of China. As a [recent review](#) of authoritative and semi-authoritative Chinese sources on the Taiwan issue notes, the prevailing view in Beijing is that increasing tension over Taiwan is the 'result of the move away by the current Taiwan government from anything resembling a One China perspective, along with US movement towards greater support of the island in various ways. The latter involves what is regarded by many

sources of all types as greater efforts by Washington to play the so-called 'Taiwan card', in order to pressure and contain Beijing and 'embolden' forces supporting Taiwan independence'.

Settling on 'strategic clarity' thus creates dilemmas as wicked as simply maintaining 'strategic ambiguity' on life support. The administration, therefore, faces a difficult task to fashion a coherent and credible strategic design to manage one of the most dangerous potential flashpoints in Sino-US relations.

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Australia's new flurry of diplomacy

From Issue 7, May 2022

The new Albanese government has made regional diplomacy a priority, starting with the Prime Minister's trip to attend the Quad summit only a few hours after being sworn in. That was swiftly backed up with a visit to Indonesia, a bilateral relationship that the government seeks to enhance. Since the Federal election, Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles have been particularly active on overseas stages, with visits to [Pacific nations](#) as well as the [Shangri-La Dialogue](#) in Singapore. Wong's visit to Fiji, and then to Samoa and Tonga, coincided with the multi-nation trip to the region by the Chinese [Foreign Minister Wang Yi](#), whose attempts to persuade ten Pacific nations to sign up to a security deal ultimately collapsed. And while it is drawing too long a bow to credit the new government in Canberra with having stymied Canberra's plans, the Pacific focus has won cautious praise from experts at home as well as abroad.

Writing for the [Straits Times](#), Jonathan Pearlman noted that the willingness of the Albanese government to pursue 'climate diplomacy' engaged more directly with the main security challenge perceived by Pacific nations. [Jacinda Ardern](#) observed during a recent meeting with Albanese that something of a 'reset' in trans-Tasman ties had been accomplished, along with a commitment to work together in partnership with Pacific nations on regional challenges. An Australian Pacific refocus on economic development, trade, aid and even sport was also the central thesis of a piece by Tim Harcourt for [Griffith Asia Insights](#).

Yet others have been more cautious: in the [Lowy Interpreter](#) Miranda Booth has stressed the importance of cooperation rather than competition with China in the Pacific. But how that is to be achieved beyond issues like HADR remains unclear. Indeed, China has responded to Australia's flurry of Pacific diplomacy with a gimlet eye: the [South China Morning Post](#) saw it as the new government engaging in 'damage control', and an attempt by Canberra to stop 'ignoring and disrespecting' the region. But regardless of the tone of Chinese messaging, it is clear that the new government will need to maintain

the momentum if it is to bolster Australian influence in the Pacific. Indeed, the newly announced visit by Foreign Minister Wong to the [Solomon Islands](#) – the focus of much Australian diplomatic effort over the last few months – is likely to be a litmus test of its new agenda.

The diplomatic efforts of the new government also point to a desire to re-engage in a broader sense with South-East Asia. The deliberate [prioritisation of Indonesia](#) for an early Prime Ministerial visit signals a return to the type of regional diplomacy characteristic of Labor governments (although former PM Scott Morrison also chose Jakarta for his first overseas visit). Yet this poses risks as well as opportunities: Indonesian interests are multilayered, and it will be important to identify and build upon [key pillars](#) of the relationship for it to flourish. Navigating Indonesia's ties with China is a case in point: it is well understood that under Albanese Australia will continue to stand up to Chinese assertiveness – but how skilfully Canberra leverages the relationship with Jakarta in the face of Chinese pressure will be vital to how Canberra's overall regional re-engagement strategy is perceived.

Finally, the future of Australia's relationship with China is a topic that many commentators have been keen to examine. Thus far, the signs are that a limited and gradual thaw is being attempted by both Beijing and Canberra. While Defence Minister Marles gave a [forthright speech](#) at the Shangri-La Dialogue, noting Australia's commitment to regional order and referring to China's military build-up as the largest and most ambitious of any nation since World War Two, he also held a [bilateral meeting on the sidelines](#) with his Chinese counterpart, General We Fenghe. And while this was the first senior ministerial-level contact between Australian and Chinese representatives for over 18 months, it would be [premature](#) to think the relationship can warm beyond the important (and in many respects worsening) security challenges that have come to shape it. At most, there may be some thaw over trade relations if a more formal meeting goes ahead later in 2022.

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The Defence Strategic Review

From Issue 8, July–August 2022

And now for our take on the big news. Defence Minister Richard Marles' recent announcement of a major [Defence Strategic Review](#) represents a landmark opportunity for Australia to recalibrate the thinking, missions and capabilities it wants the ADF to perform over the next decade. The Strategic Review will be [extensive](#). It seeks to identify priority areas for investment, force preparedness and disposition. And, it will develop an overarching strategy to ensure the ADF is fit for purpose in an environment where strategic confidence and stability continue to trend downward.

It is also long overdue. Australia is [increasingly challenged](#) in ways unsuited to a small conventional military force reliant on a stable order underwritten by the United States. Major power competition, hybrid warfare, cybersecurity dangers, and ongoing attempts by unfriendly nations to splinter regional friendships will require careful but also new thinking by the Australian government.

Asking questions and minimizing risks: Put simply, we will need to ask three questions. First, how can we best anticipate the types of threats we will face? Second, what does a realistic Australian posture to deter those threats look like? And third, what [types of capabilities](#) – both independently and in concert with allies and partners – will be needed to make Australia's deterrent credible? The outcome of the Review also entails risks. One of those is that we put capability before concept, leaving us to design our strategy around our purchasing decisions. Putting the cart before the horse in that way limits the flexibility of our armed forces, and risks turning what should be choices into constraints.

Another risk is that we fall into the trap of assuming strategic constancy: in other words, believing that what has worked before will work in the future. Making strategy is always a series of bets, but we also need to plan for strategic shocks. At present, much of our defence planning rests on the [assumption](#) that the United States will remain prepared to militarily contest China for regional supremacy, including close to the Chinese mainland.

Deterrence choices: Many of our [choices](#) have been predicated on the belief that anything other than deepening links to the US is preposterous. Indeed, the nuclear submarine component of the AUKUS agreement is built around Australia being integrated into US warfighting efforts. Recalling the 'Forward Defence' approach of the 1970s and 1980s, it envisages a deterrence-by-punishment approach: that is, Australia and its allies will be capable of inflicting such harm on the PRC that Beijing regards major war as a losing bet.

But what do we do if in the future the US is no longer prepared to fight to protect Taiwan? Or the South China Sea? Or the South Pacific? In America's turbulent domestic politics, the [isolationist](#) strand of its foreign policy thinking has not gone away.

Having failed to have a Plan B for the transactional approach of Donald Trump's presidency, we will need to carefully align our defence planning and capabilities to be as flexible as possible. That's in order to be the most effective ally we can to the US, as well as building [sovereign capabilities](#) of our own in case America's own security policy changes in ways that negatively affect us.

Are there other options? Given that many commentators are offering opinions about what the Defence Strategic Review might focus on, we will use this medium to shamelessly advance our own suggestion. We believe that one alternative here is to develop the capacity to [deter by denial](#), rather than by punishment. In other words, this envisages that the ADF should be sufficiently equipped to make Australia a tough nut for China to crack – so much so that it is not worth the effort. At the same time, a

network of security partnerships with like-minded actors in the region (what has been called ‘nodal’ defence) spreads the overall task of managing regional security and ensures Australia remains regionally integrated, not potentially isolated.

Naturally, this would have significant implications for Australia’s defence posture. But it may eventually make better use of our resources, decrease the risks of our strategic bets, and make us a more useful security partner to the US. Having the capacity to protect the sea lanes on which Australia’s trade depends, or secure the South Pacific, will go a long way towards giving us control of our strategic destiny – as well as better sharing the security burden with our American ally.

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AUKUS anniversary

From Issue 9, September 2022

Since the [announcement](#) on 15 September 2021 of the Australia–UK–US (AUKUS) agreement for cooperation on Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) – [as well](#) as closer cooperation between the three allies on artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, underwater systems, and long-range strike capabilities – an enormous amount of commentary has been generated as to the agreement’s implications for Australian strategic and defence policy, its relations with allies (the US and Britain) and friends (France), and the broader regional strategic environment.

Some were eager to claim that AUKUS would deliver all manner of strategic and security blessings onto Australia. Some breathlessly [proclaimed](#) at the time that AUKUS was a ‘new triple near-alliance’ based on ‘capability, convergent interest and, above all, trust’ that would deliver a ‘merger’ of US, UK and Australian ‘military, industrial and scientific capabilities’. Of course, AUKUS, is [not](#) an alliance by any accepted definition of that term but rather an agreement to build on existing alliance ties and cooperation on a range of military, strategic and technological issues.

The most notable of these has concerned a commitment from US and UK to assist Australia in the acquisition of a fleet of SSNs. On this score, as one of us [noted](#) at the time, there remained significant

unanswered questions about what this would mean for Australia's already strained submarine capability, Australia's capacity to establish the necessary infrastructure and technical know-how to build and maintain a fleet of SSNs, and whether this acquisition was to be aligned with a coherent strategy for their use.

Progress toward answering some of these questions has been made in the past 12 months. With respect to developing the necessary physical and skills infrastructure to acquire and sustain an SSN capability, the Morrison government announced prior to the federal election commitments to: [construct](#) a 'future navy base' at Port Kembla, Newcastle or Brisbane; [triple](#) the size of the Osborne Shipyard in Adelaide for future shipbuilding; and a \$A1 billion [investment](#) in the upgrade of the home port for Australia's submarines at HMAS Stirling in Perth. Subsequently, a bipartisan bill, the 'Australia–U.S. Submarine Officer Pipeline Act', was [introduced](#) to the US Congress in June 2022. The [bill](#), if passed, would approve 'two Australian submarine officers' to be selected to receive training at the US Navy Nuclear Propulsion School and 'following completion of such course, be assigned to duty on an operational United States submarine at sea'. In September, new Minister of Defence, Richard Marles, also announced a training agreement with the UK for Australian submariners to undertake 'training aboard HMS Anson', the UK's [fifth](#) Astute-class submarine.

The broader, and arguably more important, question of how the future acquisition of SSN capabilities will factor into Australian strategic and defence policy remains, on the basis of publicly available evidence, an open one. The Lowy Institute's Sam Roggeveen recently [hinted](#) at the core question here. He noted that if all eight SSNs envisaged under AUKUS are delivered, Australia will have 'more than the UK and France now have, or plan to have'. Further, Australia will have acquired a 'global strike capability' by virtue of an SSN's 'almost infinite range and endurance' and their arming with 'missiles that can strike targets thousands of kilometres inland'.

This line of thinking *implies* that a strategy of deterrence by [punishment](#) will animate Australia's SSN capability. This would constitute a profound shift from the deterrence by [denial](#) logic that has [underpinned](#) Australian defence posture since the 1980s. The question here, then, is if the objective remains deterrence by denial, then an Australian SSN fleet makes little sense. However, if the goal is to threaten punishment, then an Australian SSN capability is more logical, although that also assumes that such assets would be fully integrated into US warfighting plans. While an Australian SSN capability that could undertake a deterrence by punishment mission would perform important alliance signalling functions, it further commits Australia to participate in any future scenario involving conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC) – including over Taiwan.

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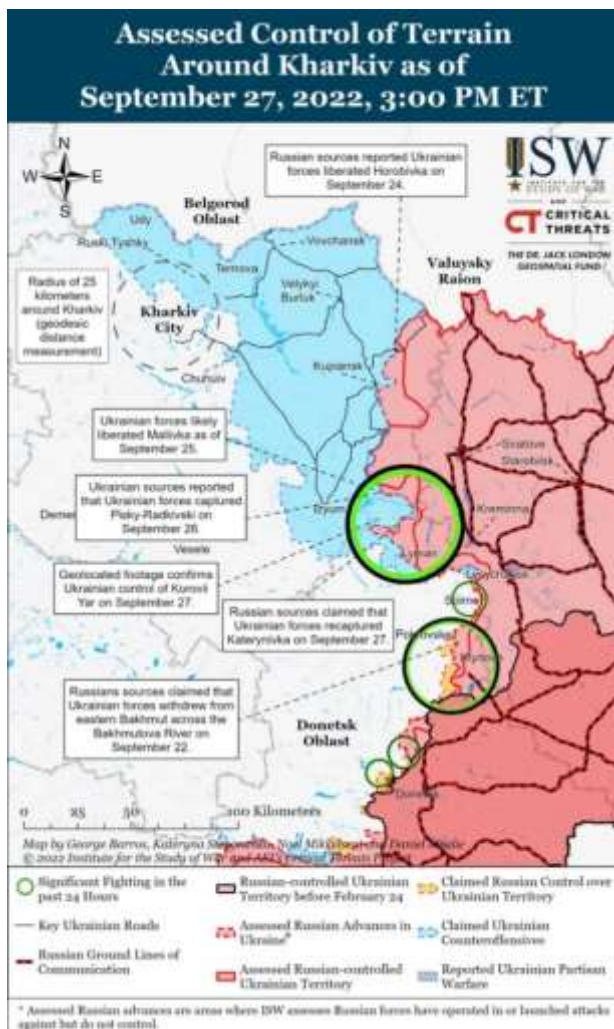
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Implications of Ukraine's counteroffensive

From Issue 9, September 2022

September's [Ukrainian counteroffensive](#) against Russian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk clearly took Moscow by surprise. Long telegraphed as a strike from the south-east, around the city of Kherson, the Ukrainian armed forces instead launched their main effort from the north-east near Kharkov. With the Russian military redeploying to the Kherson region in order to block the anticipated assault, the Ukrainian counteroffensive encountered [weakly defended positions](#) made up of reservists and local Donetsk militia. Over around five days, Ukrainian forces broke through Russian lines, liberated over 5,000 square kilometres of territory, and sent Russian forces into a hasty retreat (which was, naturally, described on Russian state media as '[regrouping](#)'). The progress of that offensive has predictably slowed as Ukrainian forces look to secure important transit nodes, such as the city of Izyum, but continue to press their advantage, particularly in Donetsk oblast.

Figure 1: Ukrainian gains around Kharkiv



Source: Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, and Will Kiellm, 'Russian Campaign Assessment, October 3', *Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project*, 3 October 2022, 9.00 pm ET. <https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-3>

In Ukraine's south-east a supporting effort has been launched by Kyiv's forces, albeit against more heavily fortified and defended Russian positions. The front's centre of gravity has shifted towards the town of [Lyman](#), as Ukrainian forces attempt to pocket a large Russian force there. The prospect of liberating the recently lost city of Lysychansk would be a significant blow to the Russian resupply effort, both in the north as well as the south.

However, a comprehensive Ukrainian victory on its eastern flank remains far from assured. Much will depend on how rapidly the Ukrainian military can translate its advantages into territorial gain before the arrival of significant numbers of Russian conscripts to reinforce its positions. And while there should be no illusions about the offensive capabilities of these new units – the members of which will receive little to no training and be poorly equipped – the Russian strategy is clearly to backfill its lines with a [blocking force](#) over the European winter, giving its more seasoned troops the chance to rest and resupply.

There is also a broader geopolitical dimension to Moscow's strategy: being able to drag the war back to a long and grinding campaign of attrition will not only gradually bleed Ukrainian forces but also buy time for Russia's energy blockades against the EU to take effect. The imposition of these energy costs against previously heavily dependent nations like Germany – which the [recent sabotage](#) of the Nordstream 1 and half of the Nordstream 2 pipelines now formalises – will certainly be a test of NATO unity and patience. This also speaks to continuity rather than change on the part of the Kremlin. It is evident from Vladimir Putin's escalatory actions, especially around the targeting of energy supplies, that he continues to have faith in an eventual fracturing of Western support for Ukraine.

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Russia's escalation threats

From Issue 10, October 2022

With the Ukraine quagmire increasingly becoming intractable for Russia, the Kremlin returned to attempting to pressure Western governments to downscale their support for Kyiv by using one of its favourite tactics: tapping into fears over nuclear and radiological weapons. Several Russian officials made statements about Ukraine's intention to construct a ['dirty bomb'](#). Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu also turned up the heat by calling several Western counterparts to discuss the issue, including twice to [Lloyd Austin](#). Moscow even went as far as to call for a UN Security Council meeting to debate the matter. Putin himself weighed in, claiming again that Russia would reserve the right to defend itself – and its newly acquired territories – using any means necessary, typically interpreted as code for the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

At least initially, the Kremlin's latest foray into brinkmanship appeared to bear fruit. In the US, the Democratic Party's Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) released a [letter](#) urging the Biden

administration to rethink its approach to the war in Ukraine, and emphasised the importance of peace talks. Amid a storm of criticism from within its own party – and among some Republicans – the CPC swiftly [withdrew](#) the letter. The concern was the letter gave the appearance of weakening US unity, which Moscow could interpret as proof positive its nuclear sabre rattling is effective. And while it remains unclear what advice the CPC was relying on in its drafting of the letter (some, for instance, have pointed the finger at the [Quincy Institute](#)), it was an unhelpful development for a US administration seeking to project an unshakeable commitment to Ukraine that is broadly bipartisan, as well as backed from within the Democratic Party.

But US politics aside, the substance of the Russian claims also deserves some scrutiny, especially since any shred of credibility behind the Kremlin narrative swiftly collapsed. Indeed, why Ukraine would choose to construct, let alone deploy a dirty bomb, given it has no interest in engaging in radiological terrorism on its own soil – or in providing the Kremlin with a pretext to escalate – was something the Putin regime evidently failed to think through. For one thing, its claims [mirrored similar](#) unsubstantiated charges about Ukrainian ‘dirty bombs’ Russia made in August 2022 but swiftly abandoned, not to mention previous attempts to spread spurious conspiracy theories about CIA–Ukrainian [bioweapon laboratories](#). Then, Moscow made matters worse for its new ‘dirty bomb’ claims when the supposed images of a Ukrainian dirty bomb released by the Russian government were later proven to actually be from [Slovenia’s](#) nuclear waste management authority in 2010.

The affair prompted Putin to walk back Russian innuendo about nuclear escalation at the 19th annual meeting of the [Valdai Discussion Club](#), a Moscow-based dialogue that promotes Kremlin-friendly analysis from analysts around the globe. In an [address](#) characterised by his now typical bombast, Putin again blamed the US, as an aggressive and destabilising exporter of global hegemony, and claimed that the world’s ‘most dangerous decade’ lay ahead. He also attempted to flip the narrative on nuclear escalation, arguing that press reports about Russia using nuclear weapons were a calculated ploy on behalf of Western governments designed to scare Moscow’s supporters by showing ‘what a bad country Russia is’. In the same speech, Putin said [he had ordered](#) Shoigu to call Western defence ministers to express Russian concerns, and insisted that ‘we never said anything about the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia’.

What should we make of Russia’s nuclear posturing that for some time now has seemed to follow a pattern of implicit threats followed soon after by denials? Arguably, an important part of the explanation is Russian intimidation seeks to gather information from Western governments, as well as their publics. Put simply, the Kremlin is attempting to establish the extent to which the West fears an implied Russian behaviour; what types of behaviour it will tolerate (in other words, what it will not respond to as a result of that fear); and what types of behaviour will elicit a Western response. In that context, the US and its allies have two appropriate responses. One is to provide no information at all through strategic ambiguity – essentially to equivocate about what may or may not produce a Western response. A second is to respond in terms of the likely consequences of Russian escalation. Given President Biden issued some [robust remarks](#) warning Putin any Kremlin decision to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine could lead to Armageddon, it is evident that the White House has chosen the latter option. In terms of deterrence, this is probably sensible: it communicates resolve and establishes a clear intent not to be intimidated, or to permit Putin to retain escalation dominance.

The domestic drivers of Russian nuclear signalling are also important to understand. With news from the front lines in Ukraine universally and unrelentingly bad for Russia, the fact that the Kremlin has turned to muscular displays of strength is likely a reflection of perceived internal [fragility and weakness](#) – or at least an awareness that the Putin regime may become vulnerable. Indeed, Russian domestic messaging has recently shifted even harder to the right. It should be recalled that the Kremlin began the year with its already startling ‘denazification’ rhetoric, which was used as a justification for the invasion in the first place. Subsequently, this became an argument for the necessary restoration of [Russia’s empire](#) in the face of NATO encirclement, with the implication that the ‘Special Military Operation’ was a heroic

historical mission. More recently, the Russian commentariat has claimed Moscow is in fact engaged in 'de-Satanization' in Ukraine, along with additional rhetoric about Western moral decay on issues ranging from transgender advocacy to 'wokeness' and secularism.

At least domestically, this inflammatory rhetoric is not sustainable for much longer – Russia is simply [running out](#) of escalatory language to justify its actions on the one hand and try to motivate the population on the other. And while it is difficult to see what messaging can be more extreme than claiming the nation is on a quest to combat Satan, it is likely the only option left to the Kremlin will be to switch from blaming external forces in Ukraine to claiming they have penetrated Russian society itself. Such a tactic could be used to explain Moscow's failure to achieve its military objectives. It would also set the scene for the identification of traitors, saboteurs and rogue elements inside Russia, deflecting attention away from Putin's decisions and dampening down potential dissent through fear of purges, at both the state's top and bottom. Already there has been disquiet about the performance of Russia's [military leadership](#), amplified most notably by Yevgenyi Prigozhin (the head of the Wagner PMC group) as well as the Chechen head, [Ramzan Kadyrov](#). Indeed, Kadyrov has also blamed portions of Russian society, claiming that the younger generation, especially amongst the elite, does not want to fight for the nation.

This infighting may serve Putin in the short term, by keeping Kremlin elites disunited. But it is likely also to cause longer-term structural problems. If continued battlefield failures compel him to take significant steps – like replacing Shoigu, for instance – it will disrupt the balanced weakness of Kremlin clans Putin has attempted to engender. By the same token, increasingly harsh targeting of Russian citizens via scape-goating has the potential to leave Putin with no constituency to support him. And whereas legitimacy is less important in Russia's [phoney democracy](#) than more pluralist regimes, part of Putin's success has been to create the artifice of a society built on laws and popular preferences. If those are revealed to be false, it will provide incentives for popular dissatisfaction and Kremlin cliques to unite against Putin, based on one common theme – the desire to avoid being purged for the President's mistakes. In many ways, then, the war in Ukraine is promoting re-evaluations around what we assume to be true about Russia. Increasingly, assumptions about an unchallenged future for Russia's current leadership should be one of those.

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The US National Security Strategy

From Issue 10, October 2022

The Biden administration released its long delayed [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) on 12 October. Unsurprisingly, given its emergence well over halfway through Biden's term, much of the general thrust of the document has already been previewed through some of the administration's programmatic statements.

The March 2021 [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance \(INSSG\)](#), for instance, highlighted the administration's had identified five dynamics that the US needed to respond to. These were:

- a fundamental shift in the 'distribution of power across the world'
- the erosion of national cohesion in liberal democracies in the face of 'anti-democratic forces' using 'misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption' and rising inequalities
- the 'testing' of the 'alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms' the United States helped build after 1945
- the 'peril and promise' of emerging technologies
- the transnational challenge of climate change and Covid-19 pandemic.

The INSSG [was](#) long on 'invocations of American leadership' and commitments to 'an extremely wide ranging set of foreign policy goals, from advancing human rights and confronting autocrats and populists to ensuring that the United States military remains the strongest in the world'. But it was short on strategies about how to meet them. Nonetheless, it [served](#) the purpose of 'relieving the public of the fear, anxiety, and doubt most immediately afflicting us' through its focus on such things as the Covid-19 pandemic and 'external and internal threats to American democracy' while offering the 'promise of – or hope for – a grander strategic vision ahead'.

However, as we discussed in the May issue of the *Listening Post*, the administration's efforts to construct such 'grander strategic vision' were waylaid by events, namely the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February. This caused the administration to [re-write](#) the document to [account](#) for how the war had shifted international politics and to equalise the relative weighting of Europe and Asia in the administration's attentions. The brief 'fact sheet' on the still-classified NDS supplied by the administration in March, in turn, unsurprisingly [identified](#) 'deterring aggression' and 'deterring strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners', with a prioritisation of 'the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific' and the 'Russia challenge' in Europe, as its central objectives. Subsequent [comments](#) by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on 18 May that the administration was seeking 'a certain level of integration and a symbiosis in the strategy we are pursuing in Europe and the strategy we're pursuing in the Indo-Pacific' underscored this.

How this 'symbiosis' was to be achieved remained an unanswered question. In theory, the new NSS was to provide the answer. Has the administration [succumbed](#) to the old joke that 'strategy writing in the government is like ornamenting a Christmas tree—everyone gets a chance to add their favorite issue and, in the process, the strategy gets lost'? The [consensus](#) of a [wide range](#) of [observers](#) would appear to be 'yes', although some also see a range of positive elements, such as the administration's continued emphasis on alliances and coalition building and greater consideration of transnational security challenges.

As President Biden's [introductory](#) letter to the document asserts, the message the NSS seeks to convey is that, as long as the United States provides 'leadership', reinvigorates 'America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships', invests in American innovation and 'competitiveness', and works to build democratic 'resilience' at home, there is nothing beyond US capacity. However, a coherent strategy,

requires more than such obeisance to liberal internationalist shibboleths. Indeed, prioritisation and trade-offs between not only means and ends but also core security threats, issue areas, and regions of geographic focus are necessary for a realistic strategy.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence of this in the document.

On the question of the challenges posed by China and Russia, for instance, contradiction reigns. The document states that the NSS 'recognizes that the PRC presents America's most consequential geopolitical challenge'. It sees China as its 'only competitor' with both the intent and capacity to 'reshape the international order'. In comparison, Russia 'poses an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe and is a source of disruption and instability globally, but it lacks the across the spectrum capabilities of the PRC'. This distinction, one would reasonably expect, should translate into a clear prioritisation of China over Russia. Yet this is not immediately apparent in the document in the specific sections on each country.

Moreover, one of the primary *means* by which the document conceives the United States will out 'compete' China (and to a lesser degree Russia) is [through](#) an 'implicitly anti-neoliberal stance on economic policy'. The administration's executive branch interventions into the US economy are [seen](#) by the administration as weapons in rivalry with China. For example, its [Supply Chain Resilience](#) plan is [designed](#) to use 'existing statutory authorities to encourage and expand the domestic advanced manufacturing base, especially for critical supply chains' necessary for the emerging technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

This, as one observer [notes](#), 'suggests that trends like "friend-shoring" sensitive supply chains and mobilizing large government-directed investments in strategically important industries (e.g., semiconductors, artificial intelligence, critical infrastructure) will likely continue'. Such domestically oriented economic interventionism, however, appears to stand in contrast to the NSS's [assertions](#) of continued American commitment to, and reliance on, 'fair and open trade' and a liberal 'international economic system' for its prosperity.

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It's Xi's Party: the CCP's 20th Party Congress

From Issue 10, October 2022

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Party Congress concluded on 22 October 2022. The Congress has proved to be highly significant in affirming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping's dominance. This was demonstrated in three areas at the Party Congress:

- selection of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the 24-member Politburo and changes to the make-up of the Central Military Commission (CMC)
- incorporation of some key ideological precepts associated with Xi into the Party constitution
- affirmation of Xi's ideological and political 'line'.

Xi's political dominance of the Party was underlined by the selection of the new PBSC. Only three of the seven members of the PBSC from the 19th Central Committee remain – Xi Jinping, Xi's 'ideologist' [Wang Huning](#) and, former head of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), Zhao Leiji. The four newcomers are all [considered](#) to be 'Xi's men', due to various levels of prior professional ties to the General Secretary. Each of these new members of the PBSC come from regional power bases closely [associated](#) with Xi on his rise to power. Li Qiang was most recently Shanghai Party chief represents Xi's base of influence in Zhejiang. Cai Xi was most recently mayor of Beijing and previously served in various roles in both Fujian and Zhejiang (for example, he was mayor of Hangzhou between 2007 and 2010), which overlapped with Xi's career in these provinces. While most recently serving as Party chief in Guangdong, Li Xi has deep roots in Shaanxi (including serving as mayor of Yan'an from 2006 to 2011) as does Xi and his family. And, the fourth new member, [Ding Xuexiang](#) served as Xi's chief of staff during the General Secretary's time as Shanghai Party chief.

Xi has also removed any remaining semblance of [factional balancing](#) within the top level of the Party, a practice that has prevailed for the majority of the post-Mao era. Instead, he has [replaced](#) it with political loyalty to himself. For instance, figures such as Premier Li Keqiang and former Vice Premier Wang Yang from the new PBSC, who are connected to the so-called Communist Youth League (CYL) faction that is associated with former General Secretary Hu Jintao, have been omitted. This certainly puts pay to some of the [over-heated speculation](#) prior to the CCP congress about an [emerging](#) 'split' within the top level of the CCP between supposedly 'reformist' or 'liberal' elements associated with Premier Li Keqiang on the one hand and Xi's more ideologically committed retainers on the other. Xi has now without question asserted his political dominance over the Party at the highest level.

The 24-member Politburo has also seen significant turnover in personnel. Here too the incoming members are seen as Xi loyalists. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, some of the newcomers' professional backgrounds suggest a strengthening of key policy directions strongly associated with Xi over the past five years. Officials promoted to the Politburo, such as Ma Xingrui (current Xinjiang Party chief), Zhang Guoqing (current Party chief of Liaoning) and Yuan Jiajun (current Party chief of Zhejiang), [have](#) backgrounds in China's defense industries or science and technology state firms. One reading of this is it reflects Xi's continued drive to develop industrial and technological 'self-reliance' in the face of ongoing Sino-US tension and competition.

The changes in the make-up of the CMC point to a continuation in the direction of PLA policies that have become hallmarks of Xi's leadership. The [new CMC](#) – consisting in rank order of General Zhang Youxia (Vice Chairman), General He Weidong (Vice Chairman), General Li Shangfu (PLA Strategic Support Force), General Liu Zhenli (PLA), Admiral Miao Hua (PLA Navy) and General Zhang Shengmin (PLA Rocket Force) – is notable for several reasons.

- The retention of Zhang Youxia as Vice Chairman bucks retirement norms (he is 72) and suggests that Xi values both his deep familial connections (Zhang and Xi's fathers served together during the Chinese civil war) and battlefield experience (Zhang served in the Sino-Vietnam War of 1979).
- The promotion to Vice Chairman of General He Weidong is notable, as he has not previously served on the CCP Central Committee and has now jumped rapidly from the role of Commander of the Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) to vice chairmanship of the CMC.
- The decision *not* to select a civilian to serve as one of the CMC's Vice Chairman breaks with recent practice. For example both Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin served in that capacity before ascending to the position of General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the CMC. This [suggests](#) 'Xi has no immediate plans to groom a successor' and that his 'grip on power within the PLA and CMC has strengthened'.
- The selection of General Li Shangfu as Minister of National Defense – with his background in aerospace engineering and as head of the [PLA Strategic Support Force](#) (PLASSF) since 2016 – likely confirms continued emphasis will be placed on the development of the PLA's 'informationized' and 'intelligentized' warfare capabilities.
- He Weidong's promotion to CMC Vice Chairman from Commander of the ETC may indicate that his operational experience commanding PLA forces facing Taiwan is highly valued by Xi.
- The retention of Admiral Miao Hua (PLA Navy) and General Zhang Shengmin (PLA Rocket Force), in their respective roles of head of political work and head of discipline inspection, demonstrates Xi's [focus](#) on anti-corruption' and ideological discipline within the PLA will continue.

Beyond the issue of personnel, the Party Congress also saw amendments to the Party [constitution](#) that incorporate some of Xi's key ideological precepts and policy priorities. The amended Party constitution now [enshrines](#) the '[two establishes](#)' (to establish the status of Xi Jinping as the 'core' of the CCP and to establish the guiding role of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era'). It also hails Xi's drive since 2012 for greater Party discipline and 'rigorous self-governance' as necessary to 'forge' the 'good steel' required for the Party and country to face the 'situation of unparalleled complexity' and 'fight of unparalleled graveness...in promoting reform, development, and stability'.

Finally, there are two broad policy emphases in Xi's report to the Party Congress that are worthy of comment.

First, the quest for [security](#) – both in a domestic and international context – has arguably become a defining feature of Xi's tenure. But at the Party Congress, Xi warned that the country was entering 'a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent'. He further emphasised challenges to China's security saying:

We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms.

In this context the continued [application](#) of a 'holistic approach to national security' in which the Party would have 'the people's security as our ultimate goal, political security as our fundamental task, economic security as our foundation, military, technological, cultural, and social security as important pillars, and international security as a support' is required. While not entirely new – for example, Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress in [2017](#) made reference to a similar formulation – this framing is

arguably more explicit in asserting the links between the ‘political security’ of the CCP, domestic ‘stability’ and the achievement of ‘national rejuvenation’.

One [interpretation](#) of this is to see it as Xi’s response to adverse domestic and international developments, such as the ongoing economic and social costs of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and China’s worsening external security environment. Another view is that Xi’s emphasis on the ‘struggle’ for security is in fact primarily [political](#) – that is such a framing has permitted Xi to justify to the Party the need for him to remain at the helm at a time of such uncertainty. These are, of course, not mutually exclusive interpretations. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that the concerted focus on security means Xi has drawn a line under what has been deemed by successive leaders since 1978 as the core task of the Party – economic development – in favour of regime security.

Second, and a related theme in Xi’s report, is the continued emphasis on the need for ideological discipline within the Party. Again, while not new, the report’s foregrounding of the discussion of this topic by [reference](#) to the parlous state of ideological discipline and pervasiveness of ‘hedonism’ and ‘extravagance’ before the start of the ‘new era’ (that is the start of Xi’s first term) is revealing in two respects. First, it clearly demonstrates Xi’s identification of his predecessor Hu Jintao as presiding over the flowering of ‘serious hidden dangers in the Party, the country, and the military’. Second, it underscores what Xi sees as the Party’s secret to ‘escape the historical cycle of rise and fall’ In the words of his report to the Congress: ‘The answer is self-reform’. The Party’s drive under his leadership to ‘purify, improve, renew, and excel itself, addressed the problem of lax and weak self-governance in Party organizations at the root, and steadily fostered and developed a political atmosphere of integrity within the Party’. Only by doing so, the report to Congress concludes, can the Party ensure that it ‘will never change its nature, its conviction, or its character’.

In summary, the 20th Party Congress has underscored that Xi has at least neutered, if not eliminated, any remaining ‘factionalism’, consolidated his authority as the ideological fountainhead of the Party, and had his vision and leadership for the foreseeable future endorsed.

Further reading

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