AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

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Welcome to Issue 4 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 issues, 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.

US Nuclear Posture Review

This month brings news about the Biden administration's forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) which is expected to be released in February. The Biden administration, like all new administrations, through the NPR will provide answers to 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?

The Biden administration of course 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 have for many years been designed to achieve multiple objectives from deterring nuclear attack against the US and/or allies (and responding should deterrence fail), deterring conventional war with great power adversaries (e.g. Russia and China), serving as a tool of "counter-proliferation" by deterring the acquisition or use of WMD by others, and promoting "strategic stability".

Different administrations, unsurprisingly, have tended to emphasise some of these objectives over others. The Obama administration's 2010 NPR, for instance, sought to maintain strategic deterrence and stability at *reduced* nuclear force levels, consistent with it undertaking of nuclear arms control with Russia and 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" - and committed to not only continue the modernization of the "nuclear triad" but to develop new types of warheads, particularly "low-yield" SLBMs and sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs).

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 in fact suggests that change may be less than dramatic and focus on the elimination of the Trump-era "add-ons" (e.g. the "low yield" SLBMS) to nuclear arsenal modernization. The one area however in which the administration may make significant change regards declaratory policy. While some

punditry has focused on the pros and cons of a potential “no first use” (NFU) declaration, 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 that have disingenuously conflated “sole use” with NFU while 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 offense-defense balance – i.e. the relative ease of undertaking defense or attack given other prevailing conditions – is arguably in play. The offense-defense 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, illustrates the nature of some of these challenges. It noted new developments in China’s nuclear forces and posture and deployment of new missile systems – such as a Gliding Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (G-FOBS) – suggesting Beijing’s drive to reduce the vulnerability of its nuclear deterrent to a US first-strike and counter the potential effects of US ballistic missile defence (BMD).

Thus a classic offense-defense 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 it will take 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 that 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 signaled its commitment to the continued modernization of the US nuclear triad (i.e. nuclear capable bombers; ICBMs; and SLBMs). Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, noted here in June 2021 that "we need to have a modernized 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?". In contrast to Trump's 2018 NPR – which asserted that nuclear weapons could be used not only in 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 in response to attacks on "civilian population or infrastructure" – Biden's therefore looks set to make good on the President's rhetorical commitment to narrow the situations in which the US would consider nuclear use.

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Kazakhstan and CSTO Intervention: Geopolitics or Intra-Elite Struggle?

Protests initially set off by the raising of LPG fuel prices in the Mangystau region in the west of Kazakhstan on 2-3 January precipitated the onset of a week of nation-wide unrest and culminated in the violent suppression of protests in the capital Nur-Sultan and the commercial capital, Almaty, resulting in the deaths of at least 160 people and the arrests of thousands.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, calling the unrest a "terrorist attack" on the country's national security, not only declared a state of emergency and removed former president Nursultan Nazarbayev from the country's Security Council but also requested aid from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) - comprised of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The CSTO responded positively to Tokayev's request and deployed 2,500 "peacekeepers" to the country on 6 January on the basis of Article 4 of the group's charter that states that in the case of "an armed attack threatening safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty" of a member state "all other Member States at request of this Member State shall immediately provide the latter with the necessary aid, including military".

The fact that the bulk of the 2,500 CSTO peacekeepers were provided by Russia and that there was in fact no evidence of "an armed attack threatening safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty" on Kazakhstan led some to suggest that CSTO intervention was simply an example of Moscow's "Ukraine playbook" in action. Such takes however ignore two major factors: the domestic political context of the unrest in Kazakhstan and the dynamics of the country's geopolitical environment.

The domestic political scene has been dominated since independence in 1991 by former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev ruled without any major challenge until 2019 when he stage-managed the appointment of his hand-picked successor and current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Despite the leadership transition, Nazarbayev continued to wield considerable power and influence through his chairmanship of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Under Nazarbayev the country was long considered by many Western observers to be the most stable and successful of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. Such "stability" was based on Nazarbayev's "economics first, politics later" approach whereby his government privileged economic development (largely based on the exploitation of the country's vast hydrocarbon resources) over consolidation of genuine democratic institutions and norms. Although Nazarbayev's regime was not a brutal dictatorship it was nonetheless illiberal and authoritarian with "a wide range of political rights and freedoms are effectively non-existent" including "political plurality; media freedom; freedom of assembly; the freedom of civil

society to operate without pressure, intimidation or official consent; and freedom of association for trade unions and political parties other than the ruling Nur Otan party".

While Kazakhstan experienced significant economic development it was very unevenly spread and "KPMG has calculated that 162 people — or 0.001 per cent of the 19 million population — own 55 per cent of Kazakhstan's wealth". Nazarbayev utilized the country's resource wealth to establish a system of patronage that consolidated loyal networks of clients within the elite to undergird his nearly three-decade grip on power. Hand-in-hand with this has been endemic corruption. As a recent report by Chatham House has detailed, Nazarbayev and his daughters, son-in-law, nephew and grandson stand at the center of colossal corruption and money-laundering activities that have funneled billions of dollars of the country's wealth into offshore banks and assets. This neo-patrimonial system of rule has been at the root of prior instances of sporadic opposition to the regime – such as the Zhanaozen protests in 2011 - but the half-hearted leadership transition now appears to have stoked popular anger and disaffection to unprecedented levels. That Nazarbayev was the prime target of popular anger was illustrated by the fact that protestors around the country chanted "Shal, ket!" ("old man, out!").

Adding further to this combustible material has been the evident intra-elite contestation underway over the past year as Tokayev has tried to consolidate his position by establishing patronage networks not reliant on Nazarbayev's imprimatur. These efforts appear to have also played into the recent unrest with Tokayev arresting Karim Massimov, a close Nazarbayev loyalist, former prime minister and head of Kazakhstan's state security services, for committing "treason". Seasoned Kazakhstan watcher Joanna Lillis has noted that this could point to the possibility Massimov "was involved in a bid to topple Tokayev and seize power". A former adviser to Nazarbayev, Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, subsequently lent further credence to this theory when he stated that such a "coup d'état" could not have been carried out without "traitors in the highest echelons of power, especially in law enforcement agencies".

Tokayev thus appears to be confronted with the convergence of popular anger at the lack of the reform of what might be termed the Nazarbayev system and elite fracturing. This has prompted a convoluted narrative from Tokayev about the unrest, with the President asserting on 10 January that there was coordination between "foreign terrorists" and elements within the country's security services as "evidenced by the synchronous attack on the headquarters of regional authorities, law enforcement agencies, pre-trial detention centers, strategic facilities, banks" as well as major airports being "seized" and "roads and railways blocked".

While the basis for the "foreign terrorists" claim appears non-existent, it appears that some of the violence was instigated by armed provocateurs associated with a number of Kazakh criminal gangs potentially in the pay of Tokayev's internal regime opponents. It is in this context that Tokayev's request for CSTO intervention makes some sense. As Paul Stronski of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes "a clue to what really motivated that request is that, immediately after the violence began, Tokayev moved to replace key security officials with loyalists of his own. That suggests he did not trust the country's

security forces and may have sought Russian assistance to outmaneuver his rivals in the regime".

Thus rather than Russia opportunistically taking advantage of the crisis in Kazakhstan, it appears that Tokayev may have played on the Kremlin's status quo preferences in Central Asia to induce it to come to his aid. "The CSTO presence", Mark Galeotti suggests "was a token of support for Tokayev to encourage the rest of the Kazakh elite, and especially the security forces, to line up behind him" in the interests of "stability". Given that the intervention is also set to be extremely brief it will constitute "an easy win for the Kremlin" as it can present it "as a foreign policy achievement to domestic and international audiences" and use it to "silence criticism of the CSTO as well as enhance Russia's standing as a dependable ally".

The convergence of Russian and Chinese interests here is also notable. "Stability", in fact, is the watchword for both Moscow and Beijing as far as Kazakhstan is concerned as both "want a stable country that is in their collective economic and military thrall, and ideally with looser ties to the West". For Moscow and Beijing supporting Tokayev is thus not only prudent given Russia's long-standing ties to the country and China's extensive economic relationship and investments there but it may offer future gratitude from the leader of Central Asia's most developed economy.

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NATO-US-Russia talks and Ukraine:
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 Russian list of demands, which included a pledge from NATO not to admit Ukraine to the alliance, or supply Ukraine with offensive weapons. High level meetings were held in Brussels, led on the US side by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and for Russia by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov; ahead of the Russia-NATO summit; as well as EU and OSCE meetings on the conflict in Ukraine.

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 PR exercises that the Kremlin likely profited from more, given that they were held as a direct result of the Russian military build-up in the first place. But they did make clear that 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 between NATO members 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 that Kremlin elites firmly consider that they will be able to successfully upend the European security order.

But 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 represents a problem for 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 Kiev with both hardware and political capital, or concede to Russian pressure. Both are risky. 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.

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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.

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