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Welcome to Issue 10 of *The Listening Post*, the CDR's monthly digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts on global, regional and Australian defence and strategic issues published over the course of the month. *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.

This issue examines:

- Russian threats of escalation in Ukraine
- parsing the Chinese Communist Party's 20th Congress
- the Biden administration's National Security Strategy.

Russia's escalation threats

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

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

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 Zheijiang (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.

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