

*The Listening Post*  
Centre for Defence Research  
Issue 6, April 2022

Welcome to Issue 6 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. In this Issue we examine recent writing on the war in Ukraine, the US National Defense Strategy and NPR, and the announcement of a draft security deal between the PRC and the Solomon Islands.

### The war in Ukraine

It is becoming increasingly clear that Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been both poorly planned and executed, prompting the Kremlin to [rethink](#) its strategic objectives. Regime change – the main prize for the failed “quick win” attempt to capture Kyiv in a few hours or days – now seems off the table. Instead Russian forces have retreated from much of the territory they had captured in the north of Ukraine, regrouping around the Donbas region. [Mark Milley](#), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sees this as a move to a much longer conflict, which he suggested would last for years. Others are more bullish: for instance, [Eliot Cohen](#) has lamented the West's tendency to think of itself as weak, which makes it unable to admit that Ukraine is winning.

Nonetheless, a protracted war of attrition now appears more likely, with Russian forces seeking to gain as much territory as possible to obtain a stronger hand at the negotiating table. Ukrainian armed forces, meanwhile, have demonstrated that they are able to execute extremely effective [defensive operations](#) – but a lack of [offensive weapons](#) will make it difficult to counterattack in sufficient force to drive Russian groups further back.

In a podcast for *War on the Rocks*, [Michael Kofman and Ryan Evans](#) have examined Russia's pivot to a less ambitious approach, noting that Russian losses will likely prevent the Kremlin from being able to capture large swathes of Ukrainian territory. But it is not just Putin that has overestimated the quality of Russian forces. As Jack Detsch and Amy Mackinnon point out, [Western strategists](#) also believed Ukraine would topple quickly in the face of the Russian onslaught. The fact that it has endured thus far not only points to a need to re-evaluate Russian capabilities, but also the potential capacity of NATO militaries to achieve rapid successes.

As Ukrainian forces recapture territory formerly occupied by Russians, some truly awful revelations are emerging about alleged crimes against humanity, especially in and around the town of Bucha on the outskirts of Kyiv. [Human Rights Watch](#) has detailed accounts of summary executions of civilians and mass graves, while [other news outlets](#) are reporting stories about widespread rape – including of children – and acts of humiliation against Ukrainians. The Kremlin [has denied](#) these reports, instead claiming the UK and Ukrainian



forces are conducting killings with the intention of blaming Russia. For analysis on Russian [propaganda](#), war crimes and the prospects for justice in Ukraine, see [this piece](#) by CDR's own Matthew Sussex.

Meanwhile, the implications of the war in Ukraine for the future of world order are being hotly debated. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, [Tanisha M. Fazal](#) makes the bold case that the “return of conquest” means that the future of global order hinges on the outcome of the conflict. *Foreign Policy* has examined this in light of the implications of the war for [US grand strategy](#), with contributions from Anne-Marie Slaughter, Stephen Walt, Kishore Mahbubani, Robin Niblett and C. Raja Mohan – amongst others. This was also a theme picked up on by Andrew Monaghan and Florence Gaub. They argue for *RUSI* that the war in Ukraine highlights the need for [strategic foresight](#) given that the war in Ukraine was a “grey rhino”: in other words, a “high probability, high impact development that took shape over a long period but was largely ignored”.

How the war in Ukraine will affect US relations with China have been another topic of discussion. On this, [Anthony Cordesman](#) has argued in a piece for CSIS that it is clear Putin will remain an adversary of the US and the West as long as he remains in office, but that China is likely to be more circumspect and less openly provocative. That China has been providing rhetorical support for Russia but little in terms of [firm commitments](#) has also been assessed in a podcast for the German Marshall Foundation, featuring leading analysts such as Bonnie Glaser and Evan Medeiros. Interestingly, Australian perspectives on the issue are much less sanguine, with [Paul Dobb](#) arguing that the “no limits” partnership between China and Russia is a profound and united challenge to the West. Others foresaw the prospect of increased [nuclear proliferation](#) in Australia's region as smaller powers sought to secure themselves against potential attacks by muscular great powers. And still others have seen it as an opportunity, raising the potential for [enhanced ties](#) between Australia and other partners – including even India.

### Further reading

Keir Giles, “Ensuring Ukraine prevails is now the only moral choice”, *Chatham House Expert Briefs*, April 4, 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/04/ensuring-ukraine-prevails-now-only-moral-choice>.

Nigel Gould-Davies, William Alberque and Franz-Stefan Grady, “Russia's invasion of Ukraine: one month on”, *International Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS) Sounds Strategic* (podcast), March 29, 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/podcast/2022/04/russia-invasion-of-ukraine>.

David J. Scheffer, “Can Russia be held accountable for war crimes in Ukraine?”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 4, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/article/can-russia-be-held-accountable-war-crimes-ukraine>.

Matthew Sussex, “As horrific evidence of massacres is uncovered in Ukraine, Russian propaganda gathers pace”, *The Conversation*, April 7, 2022.



<https://theconversation.com/as-horrific-evidence-of-massacres-is-uncovered-in-ukraine-russian-propaganda-gathers-pace-180657>.

“The war in Ukraine: implications for the Indo-Pacific”, *Centre for a New American Security* virtual event featuring Richard Fontaine, Ashley Tellis, Tobias Harris, Lisa Curtis and Jacob Stokes, March 19, 2020. <https://www.cnas.org/events/virtual-event-the-war-in-ukraine-implications-for-the-indo-pacific>.

Daniel Treisman, “Putin unbound: how repression at home presaged belligerence abroad”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/putin-russia-ukraine-war-unbound>.

### US National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review

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 will be publicly released 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:

- it comes amidst major war in Europe and heightened concern by the US (and allies) of growing alignment between Russia and China;
- there remain enduring concerns that the defense budget is driven by individual service prerogatives rather than coherent strategy; and
- 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 four priorities for the Pentagon with “defending the homeland, paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC” topping a list rounded out by “detering strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners”, “detering aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing 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 has emerged in Washington over recent years that the US and China are in fact locked into “strategic competition” for the foreseeable future.



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 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 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), “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’ “most consequential strategic competitor” (i.e. China) appears at risk of emerging as a damp squib.

As foreshadowed by a number of [statements](#) by DoD officials ([including](#) Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin) since the Biden administration took office, one of the organizing concepts upon which US defense strategy will rest is “integrated deterrence”. The NDS factsheet notes that it will seek to achieve the four objectives noted above in “three primary ways: integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages”. How these is 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 non-military 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, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of U.S. 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 from this 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, synchronize 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 toward what Frank Hoffman [describes](#) as an explicit “whole of government” deterrence approach that seeks to integrate the US’ military and non-military 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 that 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 “U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy” is underpinned by the consideration that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of U.S. 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 modernization 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 reestablishing our leadership in arms control” and will seek “to emphasize 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 too 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”.

#### Further reading

Doyle MacManus, “Biden’s defense budget is big. Democrats will vote to make it bigger”, *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2022-04-03/bidens-defense-budget-is-big-democrats-will-vote-to-make-it-bigger>

Kori Schake, “The White House Is Getting Defense Wrong”, *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/biden-defense-budget-national-security/629412/>

Fred Kaplan, “A Megaton of Waste”, *Slate*, 30 March 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/bidens-new-defense-budget-wastes-a-crazy-amount-of-money-on-new-nuclear-weapons.html>

Frank Hoffman, “Conceptualizing Integrated Deterrence”, *Lawfire*, 8 January 2022, <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2022/01/08/guest-post-dr-frank-hoffman-on-conceptualizing-integrated-deterrence/>

Michael Clarke, “Back to the Future: Is ‘Integrated Deterrence’ the New ‘Flexible Response’?”, *The National Interest*, 23 October 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/back-future-%E2%80%99integrated-deterrence%E2%80%99-new-%E2%80%99flexible-response%E2%80%99-195274>

#### Wang Yi’s South Asian tour



At the end of last month Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a six-day tour of South Asia, stopping in Pakistan and Nepal as well as unannounced stops in India and Afghanistan. His visits to Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan, in part, were focused on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Yet, an arguably bigger objective for Beijing for Wang's tour was to shore up its relationships with some of its immediate neighbours given the deterioration of its relationships with Europe, the United States and others in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In Pakistan, Wang [was](#) the guest of honour at the 48th session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad. China's objectives in the Islamic world Wang [asserted](#) during his address to the OIC would be to forge "four partnerships with Islamic countries": partnerships of "unity and cooperation", "development and revitalization", safety and stability, and "mutual learning among civilizations". The first of these in practice entails that China and OIC states "firmly support each other in safeguarding national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity" and assist each other to pursue "development paths suited to our national conditions, and in safeguarding our legitimate development rights and interests as well as the common interests of developing countries". The second entails China lead the way in "south-south cooperation" on economic development and public health through BRI and vaccine diplomacy, while the third means working toward a "comprehensive and just settlement" based on "self-determination" for Palestine and Kashmir and "peace talks" between Russia and Ukraine.

Finally, while both Chinese and Islamic civilizations have "made great contributions to human civilization in history" they have "been treated unfairly in modern times" and as such they should continue "joining hands on the road of development and rejuvenation" so as to "oppose the theory of 'the superiority of civilizations', the theory of 'clash of civilizations', and the distortion and smear of non-Western civilizations". Significantly, in light of China's [mass repression](#) in Xinjiang, Wang also claimed here that, "We should deepen preventive counter-terrorism and deradicalization cooperation, reject 'double standards' in counter-terrorism, and oppose linking terrorism with any particular ethnic group or religion".

Taken together each of these "partnerships" are [consistent](#) with what have become the hallmarks of Beijing's approach to the Muslim world writ large: assertions of China's solidarity with the Muslim world in the face of "unfair" treatment by the West; Chinese support for the resolution of the Palestinian and Kashmir issues on terms favoured by the Muslim world; promotion of BRI as a means of "south-south cooperation"; and the active defence and promotion of Chinese policy in Xinjiang as a model of "counter-terrorism".

While in Islamabad Wang also attended Pakistan's National Day military parade that [showcased](#) China's J-10C fighters and ZDK-03 early warning aircraft and had official meetings with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi. These meetings [reaffirmed](#) the cornerstones of China and Pakistan's "ironclad friendship" such as the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC), concluded a number of new agreements to strengthen cooperation in agriculture and education, and affirmed the "positive role" of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue" in contributing to "stability in Afghanistan".



Pointedly, a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Defence, PLA Senior Colonel Wu Qian, subsequently also [stated](#) that “military-to-military relations” served as the “mainstay of the China-Pakistan friendship” and that both militaries “stand ready to expand practical cooperation in various fields to a new level and inject a new impetus into the all-weather strategic cooperative partnership between the two countries”. This point was [reinforced](#) by Wang travelling to Rawalpindi to meet Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Armed Forces, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, where Wang [noted](#) that the “Afghan issue should not be solved by exerting pressure or imposing sanctions” but via engagement with the Taliban – a position closely aligned with that of Islamabad. Beijing’s confidence in the “[rock solid](#)” nature of ties with Pakistan even as Prime Minister Khan’s government is assaulted by domestic political crisis in part rests on its [long-standing](#) view of the “stabilising” role of the Pakistani military which it sees as a firm friend of China.

Wang’s unannounced visit to Kabul on 24 March, in turn, constituted the highest-level Chinese official engagement with the Taliban since they took power last year. Here, Wang met with acting Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to [discuss](#) Chinese investments in Afghanistan’s mining sector, such as the [Mes Anyak](#) copper mine, and the potential role of the country in BRI. In Kathmandu, meanwhile, Wang’s visit [saw](#) the official hand over of the China-funded Pokhara Regional Airport to Nepal and the “signing of a slew of other agreements” including the operationalization of the “Tatopani/Zhangmu and Rasuwagadi/Kerung border trade posts”.

While Wang’s hosts on all of these stops were arguably well-disposed to Beijing the same could certainly not be said for the Chinese foreign minister’s brief call upon India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in New Delhi. Given that the visit was the first by the Chinese foreign minister since deadly [Sino-Indian clashes](#) in Ladakh in 2020 and that Wang had just voiced Chinese support for the “self-determination” of Kashmir at the OIC summit the lukewarm reception was perhaps to be expected.

Notwithstanding the pre-existing tension between the two, the Chinese [readout](#) of the meeting with External Affairs Minister Jaishankar shows that Beijing attempted to “park” the obvious disputes between the two and focus instead on what it claimed to be the commonalities linking them. China and India, Wang asserted, as “two neighboring ancient civilizations and the two largest developing countries and representatives of emerging economies with a combined population of 2.8 billion...are two main forces in promoting multi-polarization of the world, economic globalization, diversity of civilizations, and democratization of international relations”. Unsurprisingly, Wang’s counterpart [remained](#) more focused on achieving “de-escalation” and “disengagement” along disputed territory as a precondition for the resumption of stable and “cooperative” relations.

The Chinese readout and some commentary in Chinese state media suggests however that Beijing’s goal was not necessarily to improve Sino-Indian ties but rather a fishing trip of sorts to see if it could leverage India’s discomfort with the Russia-Ukraine war to its advantage. The Chinese [readout](#) notes in this context that both Wang and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar discussed “Ukraine, Afghanistan, and multilateral affairs” and “agreed that multilateralism should be upheld, the UN Charter and international law should be





abided by” while expressing “grave concerns over the impact of unilateral sanctions on the global economy and supply chain security”. Needless to say each of these reflect elements of Beijing’s emerging response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A commentary in [China Daily](#) subsequently reinforces the point that the visit to India was in part about manoeuvring out of what we termed in the [March 2022 Looking Glass](#) “Beijing’s Moscow Muddle”. The commentary argued that in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war both China and India “should stick to their own development paths and join hands to safeguard peace and stability both in the region and the world” and that their principled stands of adopting a “neutral stance” on the conflict in the UN have been “criticized by America”. Gu Su, an analyst from Nanjing University, [suggests](#) that Wang’s “secret” trip to India and South Asia more broadly is part of an attempt to generate “understanding and support” for its position on Ukraine and engage in damage control to “ensure that its international image will not be further tainted over the Ukraine crisis”. However, given continued Russian [outrages](#) in Ukraine that may well prove to be a forlorn effort.

### Further reading

Swaran Singh, “Decoding Wang Yi’s South Asia tour”, *Asia Times*, 29 March 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/03/decoding-wang-yis-south-asia-tour/>

“Wang’s Visit Does Little to Thaw China-India Relations”, *World Politics Review*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/30438/despite-wang-s-visit-a-thaw-in-china-india-relations-is-unlikely>

Shi Jingtao, “Why the secrecy with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s trip to South Asia?”, *South China Morning Post*, 26 March 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3171983/why-secrecy-chinese-foreign-minister-wang-yis-trip-south-asia>

Robert Bianchi, *China and the Islamic world: How the new Silk Road is transforming global politics*. (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190915285.001.0001/oso-9780190915285>

Madiha Afzal, “At All Costs”: *How Pakistan and China Control the Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2020), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP\\_20200615\\_china\\_pakistan\\_afzal\\_v2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_china_pakistan_afzal_v2.pdf)

Hoo Tiang Boon and Glenn K. H. Ong, “Military dominance in Pakistan and China–Pakistan relations”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75 (1) (2021), pp. 80-102, [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10357718.2020.1844142?casa\\_token=ZChd6r3CP0kAAAAA:9wWXUEY7ChhcnxdU9VS8j2xKU1LC586JQ2caa8wsAb9lC7PjfwY3WQAJL7W5KSigl5ydeJsnlynd](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10357718.2020.1844142?casa_token=ZChd6r3CP0kAAAAA:9wWXUEY7ChhcnxdU9VS8j2xKU1LC586JQ2caa8wsAb9lC7PjfwY3WQAJL7W5KSigl5ydeJsnlynd)



### The PRC-Solomon Islands security deal

A leaked draft of an official document in late March contained some disturbing news for Australian national security watchers: the Solomon Islands is 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 covers 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 applies 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 that 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.

There are several implications of the deal 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 that 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](#) for instance 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' 13<sup>th</sup> 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.



