The Listening Post
Centre for Defence Research
Issue 7, May 2022

Welcome to Issue 7 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 and reporting on possible shifts in US policy toward Taiwan, how Russia's war in Ukraine may have prompted a re-write of the Biden administration's expected National Security Strategy, speculation of a split within the top-levels of the CCP, and setbacks to China's push for influence in the Pacific.

US Commitment to Taiwan: Is "Strategic Ambiguity" on Life Support?

During his recent visit to Japan, US President Joe Biden made another statement on US commitment to Taiwan that suggests 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 "that's the commitment we made". As numerous commentators have pointed out however the US does not have a formal commitment to defend Taiwan. While such a treaty-based commitment was in fact scrapped in 1979 with the normalization 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 with Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin noting 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" (i.e. ensuring that neither Beijing nor Taipei can be certain of US involvement in the event of a cross-Strait conflict) on Taiwan that 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 toward Washington's jettisoning of "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 that permits US officials to travel to Taiwan and meet with Taiwanese counterparts; Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) designed to assist Taiwan in maintaining existing diplomatic relations; and the passing of the National Defense Authorization Act (2020) that 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 that allude 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 Menedez, 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 toward 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 modernization – including significant investment in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities - has overcome its historical weakness of its conventional capabilities vis-à-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 that this apparent slide toward "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 U.S. movement toward 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.

Further reading:
Thomas Shattuck, "Believe Biden When He Says America Will Defend Taiwan", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 25 May 2022, https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/believe-biden-when-he-says-america-will-defend-taiwan/

Bradley Martin, Kristen Gunness, Paul DeLuca, Melissa Shostak, *Implications of a Coercive Quarantine of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1279-1.html

Michael Swaine, "Recent Chinese Views on the Taiwan Issue", *China Leadership Monitor*, December 2021, https://www.prcleader.org/swaine-3

Yuan-Chou Jing and Yi-Ren Lai, "Evolving Missions and Capabilities of the PLA Rocket Force: Implications for Taiwan and Beyond", *China Brief*, 19 November 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/evolving-missions-and-capabilities-of-the-pla-rocket-force-implications-for-taiwan-and-beyond/

John S. Van Oudenaren, “All Necessary Measures: China’s Shifting Approach to U.S.-Taiwan Relations”, *China Brief*, 11 February 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/all-necessary-measures-chinas-shifting-approach-to-u-s-taiwan-relations/

Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine is Prompting a Re-write Biden’s National Security Strategy

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues to have ramifications well beyond the immediate European security environment. We have covered in detail in previous *Looking Glass* issues, for example, the effect of Russia’s war on Sino-Russian relations. Russia’s adventurism in Ukraine also continues to have a significant impact on evolving American defence and strategic policy. For some pundits the effect of Putin’s war on US strategic policy amounts to a distraction from what is the main game: strategic competition with China to, in President Biden’s phrase, “win the 21st century”. From this perspective, the Biden administration’s swift rallying of European and allied condemnation and economic sanctioning of Russia and arming of Ukraine has effectively contained the Russian challenge.

However, despite this success there is a concern amongst many American Asia-watchers that the Biden administration’s attention will remain divided between Asia and Europe so long as the war in Ukraine drags on and Putin remains unchastened. The trend toward a divided strategic attention has been noticeable for some time. It was in evidence prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for example, when Department of Defense spokesman in late January rejected the implication from a journalist that the US could not in fact “walk and chew gum at the same time” on Russia and China. More significantly, this trend is evident in the drift of key strategy documents such as the still-classified National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the long-delayed and yet to be released National Security Strategy (NSS).

As we noted in last month’s ***Listening Post*** the two-page “fact sheet” on the NDS released by the Pentagon in late March appeared to emphasize that the administration would be focusing attention on both Russia and China. The fact-sheet pointedly identified “deterring aggression” and “deterring strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners”, with a prioritization of “the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific” and the “Russia challenge” in Europe, as its central objective. This followed media reporting in early March that the Russian invasion had in fact resulted in a “rework” of the NDS and President Biden’s “State of the Union” address in which he spent considerable time detailing how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine constituted a signal of the world’s drift toward a “battle between autocracy and democracy”.

Now it appears that the shadow of Ukraine now looms too over the administration’s long delayed and still to be released NSS. *Bloomberg* reports that the NSS “is now being substantially rewritten to reflect the ways the world has changed since the war began” and to emphasize “the importance of both Europe and Asia to US national security interests”. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s 26 May speech on the administration’s China policy provides a hint as to how this emphasis on both Europe and Asia might be handled in the NSS. Blinken asserted here that while “Russian President Vladimir Putin poses a clear and present threat” to the existing international order, China remained the “most serious long-term challenge” to that order as it was “the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it”. This also gels with earlier comments by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan that “there is 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”.

However, the question remains as to how the administration will actually achieve this. At present the administration’s ambition to “walk and chew gum” on the European and Asian strategic theatres appears to rest more on hopeful assumptions rather than on a considered and coherent strategy. First among these perhaps is an assumption that as European allies – stung into action by Putin’s aggression – will “undertake sweeping investments to provide for their own military defense and expand them over time”, Washington may “come to conclude that its NATO allies will be able to confront future Russian aggression with fewer forward-deployed U.S. troops and assets” enabling it to in effect mount a “rebalance” to Asia. However, just as plausible is that as the war in Ukraine grinds on Washington (and its NATO allies) may in fact be drawn in deeper through provision of greater military, economic and diplomatic assistance to ensure at the least that Kyiv is not defeated. This would distract attention not only from the Asian theatre but also increase the risks of direct military escalation with Moscow.

Another problematic assumption is reflected in the administration's rhetorical framing of the Russian and Chinese challenges to the existing international order as one of "autocracies versus democracy". This narrative – while perhaps morally comforting to some in the Beltway – is of little utility as an organizing principle for strategy. For one thing such framing ignores the fact that much of the world beyond Washington's immediate allies and western liberal democracies remain lukewarm on sanctioning Russia and are positively avoiding taking a sides in the new era of "strategic competition" between the US and China. Additionally, such a framing presents "an impossible moral bar that, when flunked, earns the US a reputation for hypocrisy" and "makes the classic Chinese offer to third countries — economic patronage without moral strings — ever more tempting".

Finally, the administration's apparent drift toward simultaneous emphasis on combating Russian and Chinese challenges in both European and Asian strategic theatres raises the spectre of strategic over-extension. While some of have asserted that the current era amounts to a "second Cold War" and that the US should draw lessons from that "long twilight struggle" (as JFK phrased it), the Biden administration could do well to reflect on a basic distinction between then and now. During the Cold War Washington competed with Moscow well beyond the geographical areas which George F. Kennan had originally identified as necessary for it to contest and "did so more out of psychological concerns than material ones, worried that any Soviet foothold that went unchallenged, even in a country that might seem peripheral to vital U.S. national interests, could set in motion a fundamental reversal of Washington's strategic position". It was able to "absorb the cost of this strategic indiscipline because it was ascending relative to its competitor—a competitor that, at its height, had an economy that was only about two-fifths as its own".

Not only is China more integrated in the global economy to an extent unimaginable for the Soviet Union but its GDP is already 73% of that of the United States. A coherent strategy requires prioritization and trade-offs between not only means and ends but also core regions of geographic focus. However, evidence to date suggests that the administration is unable or unwilling to make the hard but necessary choices in this context.

Further reading:
David Charter, "Kremlin and Xi in sights of US national security strategy", *The Times*, 6 June 2022, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kremlin-and-xi-in-sights-of-us-national-security-strategy-wtx067bk7

Ali Wyne, "The War in Ukraine Will Complicate U.S.-China Relations Even More", *World Politics Review*, 3 May 2022, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30507/the-us-china-relationship-and-pivot-to-asia-after-the-ukraine-war

Peter Beinhart, "Is Biden's Foreign Policy Team the Best of 'the Blob'?", *New York Times*, 2 June 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/02/opinion/biden-the-blob-china-us.html

Gideon Rachman, "Ukraine and the Start of a Second Cold War", *Australian Financial Review*, 7 June 2022, https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/ukraine-and-the-start-of-a-second-cold-war-20220607-p5armh

Anthony Cordesman, *US National Security: Looking Beyond the War in Ukraine*, (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2022), https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-national-security-looking-beyond-war-ukraine

Michael Vakiotis, "Not everyone sees Ukraine as the main issue", *Asia Nikkei*, 15 June 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Tea-Leaves/Not-everyone-sees-Ukraine-as-the-main-issue

Bruce Jones, "A Strategy for the Fence Sitters: Learning to Live With Countries that Refuse to Take Sides on Ukraine", *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-06-15/strategy-fence-sitters

A split within the CCP leadership?
The past few months have seen increased speculation from international media about a possible "split" within the highest echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In March *Bloomberg* raised the

possibility of ructions in Zhongnanhai as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang confirmed he would step down from the premiership next year amidst Xi Jinping's moves to assure himself a third-term in the lead up to the CCP's 20th Congress later this year. More recently the *Wall Street Journal* published a lengthy article that argued that Li, long sidelined by Xi, was re-emerging as "a as a force in his own right" and "a potential counterbalance atop the Chinese government" to the general secretary's hitherto predominance. The article asserted that Li's emergence as a alternate "pole" in the CCP's constellation of power was the direct result of simmering unease within the Party about a number of major policy directions closely associated with Xi including: China's close alignment with Russia, the economic costs of China's "zero Covid" approach to the management of the pandemic (including the recent severe lockdown of Shanghai), the crackdown on China's leading tech companies and the crisis in China's property market.

The central thrust of such speculation was that Xi's overweening hubris and quest for Mao Zedong-like levels of omnipotence is generating internal opposition that could not only constrain his efforts to stage-manage the 20th Party Congress but perhaps even unseat him. How plausible is such speculation? The short answer is that it very difficult to assess. Even in the relatively more open times of Hu Jintao (2003-2013) Chinese elite politics remained notoriously difficult to decipher and that task has become even more problematic with the increased opacity imposed during Xi's tenure.

Despite this caveat however we would suggest that while such a scenario can never be entirely ruled out it nonetheless pushes the bounds of plausibility on a number of grounds. One is that this type of speculation joins a long line of wishful thinking that has tended to characterise much Western commentary on China. Indeed, the thrust of the *Wall Street Journal* piece shares some commonalities with Roger Garside's 2021 book, *China Coup: The Great Leap to Freedom.* Garside argued *not only* that there would be a coup from within the CCP that would overthrow Xi led by leaders such as Premier Li Keqiang and Vice President Wang Qishan within the next 18 months but that the new post-Xi leadership would institute democratization and liberalisation from above effectively dismantling the CCP's iron grip on power. This argument, as veteran journalist and China watcher James Mann noted caustically in a review of *China Coup*, stood "out as a pipe dream of mind-boggling implausibility".

Fred Tiewes, perhaps the world's leading scholar on CCP elite politics, notes that postulations about internal Party politics have long been bedevilled by a number of pathologies such as the use and abuse of Chinese sources, a tendency to downplay or ignore the dynamics of the Party "line" and its meaning, and penchant for identifying "factions". Arguably each of these are in evidence in recent speculations about that Xi may be facing rising opposition within the Party. The Li Keqiang-is-emerging-as-alternate-pole-to-Xi argument has in part been based on the Premier's recently enhanced profile in state media reports. Li's chairing of an executive meeting of the State Council on 24 May focused on the economy and subsequent statements in a teleconference with 100,000 officials that China faces "severe" economic pressure. While praising Xi and the Party's approach to "epidemic prevention and control", Li also asserted that "we must complete the task of economic and social development" and "avoid focusing on only one goal" and "imposing rigid uniformity on policies". This has been used as a data point for the claim that: (a) there is unease within the CCP with zero Covid; and (b) that Li's efforts represent a technocratic counter to Xi's approach.

While there is no doubt that there is public disquiet about "zero Covid" and the economic impacts have been real and significant, the notion that Li's recent prominence in state media and his statements noted above reflect a real or latent "split" within the top leadership is drawing a very long bow. Indeed, there are arguably a few more prosaic explanations. First, Li's greater profile in recent weeks and his exhortation to officials to also focus on reviving the economy and "epidemic prevention and control" could be explained as simply reflecting the leadership's recognition of the reality that "covid Zero" has adversely impacted the economy and signalling of a shift in emphasis. Second, and a more Machiavellian scenario, is that Li's prominence and association with a renewed emphasis on the economy could also provide insulation to Xi should such efforts at economic stabilisation fail.

More broadly, speculation regarding the possibility of an internal CCP "coup" against Xi tends to ignore two factors: the trend of elite politics under Xi; and the question of whether personalisation of power necessarily adversely effects institutional power. With respect to the first of these issues under Xi the trend has clearly been a return to "politics manipulating norms rather than norms governing politics" as demonstrated by Xi's reinstatement of purges (mainly in the name of "anti-corruption") as a norm of Party life and discipline and abrogation of the norms of term limits established under Deng Xiaoping. On the second issue there is evidence both from the Chinese context and a broader comparative context that personalization of power in authoritarian systems does not necessarily amount to a weakening of the power of institutions. In the case of the CCP it can be argued that Xi's consolidation of power – with all its attendant manifestations – has stabilised and perhaps reinvigorated the Party itself. Here, for instance, Xi's "anti-corruption" campaign emerges as "politically motivated in an organizational sense, attempting to prevent corruption from spiraling out of control and reinstating at least a basic sense of discipline among the ranks of the Communist Party". This is not to say that Xi's personalization of power has not produced push-back. Rather such push-back that there is stemming from concerns over "zero Covid" or the state of the economy, as Willy Wo-lap Lam has recently suggested, is much more focused on influencing Xi's plans for anointing the next generation of CCP leaders at the upcoming 20th Party Congress than in unseating the General Secretary.

Further reading:

Christopher Johnson, "Rumours that Xi Jinping is losing his grip on power are greatly exaggerated", *Financial Times*, 5 June 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/5e14bfb2-f0a9-4259-9d4c-a1b0ff607560?shareType=nongift

Frederick Tiewes, "The study of elite political conflict in the PRC: politics inside the 'black box'", in David S. Goodman (ed.), *The Handbook of Chinese Politics*, (London: Edward Elgar, 2015), pp. 21-41, https://www.elgaronline.com/downloadpdf/edcoll/9781782544364/9781782544364.00009.xml

Guoguang Wu, "Politics and Norms in Leadership Reorganization toward the 20th Party Congress: Preliminary Observations", *China Leadership Monitor*, 71 (Spring 2022), https://www.prcleader.org/wu-2

Patricia Thorton, "Of constitutions, campaigns and commissions: a century of democratic centralism under the CCP", *China Quarterly* 248 (2021), pp. 52-72, https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/708D2FF94BC0C61863B53DFDA9C382E6/S0305741021000758a.pdf/of-constitutions-campaigns-and-commissions-a-century-of-democratic-centralism-under-the-ccp.pdf

Willy Wo-lap Lam, "Xi Jinping is Poised to Become 'Leader for Life' in Exchange for Sharing Politburo Seats with Rivals", *China Brief*, 27 May 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/xi-jinping-is-poised-to-become-leader-for-life-in-exchange-for-sharing-politburo-seats-with-rivals/

Carolin Kautz, "Power Struggle or Strengthening the Party: Perspectives on Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign", *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 25 (2021), pp. 501-511, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-020-09665-9

Dimitar D. Gueorguiev, "Dictator's Shadow: Chinese Elite Politics Under Xi Jinping", *China Perspectives,* No. 1/2 (2018), https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7569

Australia's new flurry of diplomacy

The new Albanese government has made regional diplomacy a priority, starting with the Prime Minister's trip to attend to 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 in the Pacific with China. But how that is to be achieved beyond issues like HADR remains unclear. Indeed, China has responded to Australis'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 here are a case in point: it is well understood that under Albanese Australia will continue to stand up to Chinese assertiveness – but how skilfully Canberra will be able to leverage 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 Wei Fenghe. And while this was the first senior ministerial-level contact between Australian and Chinese representatives for over eighteen months, it would be premature to consider that the relationship will be able to 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.

Further reading:

Graeme Dobell, "Australia ticks strategic boxes in interesting times", *ASPI Strategist*, 14 June, 2022. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-ticks-strategic-boxes-in-interesting-times/.

Richard Marles, "Address: IISS 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore", Department of Defence, 11 June, 2022. https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/rmarles/speeches/address-iiss-19th-shangri-la-dialogue-singapore.

Gordon Nanau, "Solomon Islands-China security deal is about local needs, not geopolitics", *East Asia Forum*, 11 June, 2022. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/06/11/solomon-islands-china-security-deal-is-about-local-needs-not-geopolitics/?utm_source=subscribe2&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=postnotify&utm_id=944500&utm_title=Solomon%20Islands%26ndash%3BChina%20security%20deal%20is%20about%20local%20needs%20not%20geopolitics.

Anna Powles and Joanne Wallis, "An Albanese-Ardern Alliance in the Pacific: a Step Forward?", *ASPI Strategist*, 25 May, 2022. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/an-albanese-ardern-alliance-in-the-pacific-a-step-forward/.

Sebastian Strangio, “Australian Prime Minister Albanese Confirms Trip to Indonesia Next Week”, *The Diplomat*, 31 May, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/australian-prime-minister-albanese-confirms-trip-to-indonesia-next-week/.

Rebecca Strating, “Mutual respect and genuine partnership: how a Labor government could revamp our relationship with Indonesia”, *The Conversation,* 23 May, 2022. https://theconversation.com/mutual-respect-and-genuine-partnership-how-a-labor-government-could-revamp-our-relationship-with-indonesia-183116.

Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, “Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Islands: Ambiguous Allies?” *Centre of Gravity Series*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2018. https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-10/cog_43_web.pdf.

Joanne Wallis and Maima Koro, “Amplifying narratives about the ‘China Threat’ in the Pacific may help China achieve its broader aims”, *The Conversation*, 27 May, 2022. https://theconversation.com/amplifying-narratives-about-the-china-threat-in-the-pacific-may-help-china-achieve-its-broader-aims-183917?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=bylinetwitterbutton.