

The Listening Post

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Welcome to Issue 8 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.

This issue examines:

- China's response to Nancy Pelosi visit to Taiwan
- the implications of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's death
- Russia suspension of nuclear weapons inspections under the New START agreement
- the announcement of a major Defence Strategic Review.

China responds to Nancy Pelosi visit to Taiwan

After US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on 3 August the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) [announced](#) that it would be undertaking "joint combat training exercises in the northern, southwestern and southeastern waters and airspace off Taiwan Island" involving PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) elements focused on "joint blockade, sea target assault, strike on ground targets, and airspace control operation". These exercises, as of this writing, have taken place across the "median line" of the Taiwan Strait, have violated Taiwan's territorial waters in the northern and southern exercise zones (as indicated in Figure 1 on the next page), and have included rolling violations of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) by Chinese military aircraft and the launch of "long-range rockets

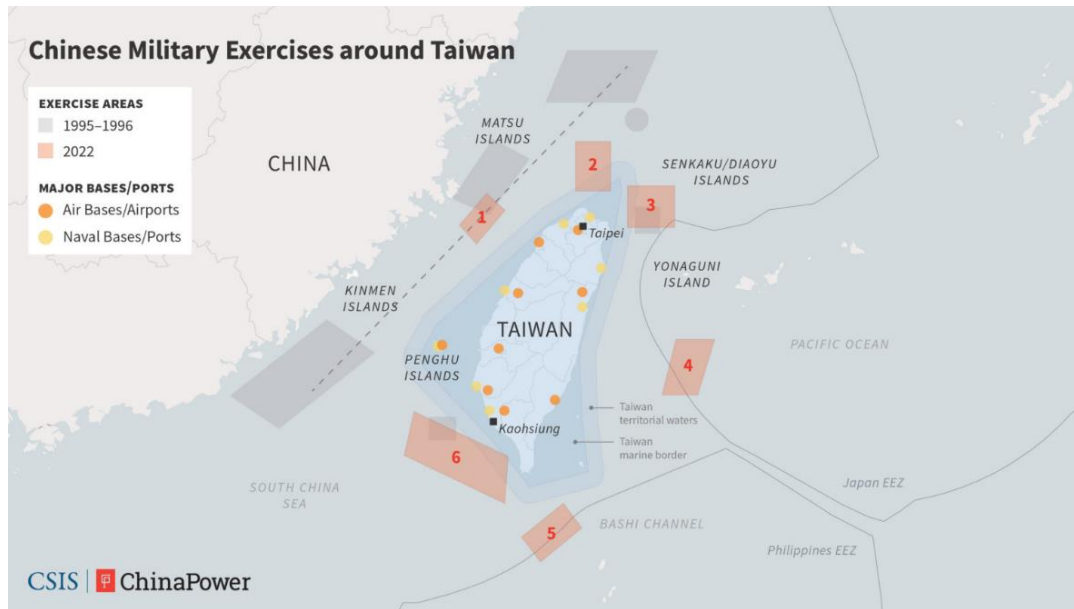


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and conventional ballistic missiles from four main regions within China into multiple exercise zones to the north, east, and south of Taiwan”. This comes after Beijing [imposed](#) a range of economic measures, including [import bans](#) on over 2,000 Taiwanese food products, as well as concerted denial-of-service [attacks](#) on Taiwanese government websites.

Figure 1: Chinese military exercises around Taiwan 4 August to 10 August 2022



Source: Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Matthew P. Funaiolo, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, Nicholas Kaufman, “Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis”, CSIS *ChinaPower* Project, 10 August 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/>

China’s response so far is [consistent](#) with its long-term strategy toward Taiwan which seeks to integrate a variety of diplomatic, economic and military instruments to coerce and deter Taipei (and the United States) from any deviation from Beijing’s [interpretation](#) of the “One China policy” which [holds](#) that “there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the *sole legal government representing the whole of China*”. The problem for Beijing is that the recent *political* trend lines on the Taiwan issue are largely [negative](#) as the Tsai Ing-wen government moves away “from anything resembling a One China perspective” and Taiwanese society sees the [solidification](#) of Taiwanese national identity and declining support for any notion of “reunification” with the Chinese mainland. The moves of the Trump and now Biden administrations toward greater support for Taiwan – including [increased](#) arms sales and intimations that Washington may soon [abandon](#) “strategic ambiguity” on the issue – suggest a far less permissive diplomatic environment in which Beijing can assert its claims to Taiwan than in the recent past. Seasoned East Asia expert Bonnie Glaser recently [noted](#) in this context that “the Chinese feel that if they don’t act, that the United States is going to continue to slice the salami to take incremental actions toward supporting Taiwan independence. China does feel under pressure to do more to signal that this is an issue in which China cannot compromise”.

Significantly, the response to Pelosi’s visit is arguably seeking to leverage the [favourable](#) *military* trend lines vis-à-vis Taiwan from China’s perspective to redress this situation. China’s actions here have four objectives:

1. Beijing is seeking to impose economic and military-strategic costs on Taipei through its employment of a variety of economic sanctions and the conduct of [extended](#) military exercises directly impinging upon Taiwan's territorial waters, EEZ and ADIZ.
2. The exercises constitute deterrent signals to both Taipei and the US. In this context, the PLA's China's military modernization – including significant investment in [anti-access/area denial](#) (A2/AD) capabilities and acquisition and [deployment](#) of new precision strike capabilities - has led the Pentagon to assess that China has [overcome](#) the historical weakness of its conventional capabilities relative to Taiwan and has improved its ability to deny access to US military intervention in the event of a cross-Strait invasion.
3. The exercises allow the PLA to rehearse a range of missions necessary for a number of scenarios from a [blockade](#) of Taiwan to preparations for direct military actions against the island.
4. The exercises also hold the potential for China to establish a [new status quo](#) regarding its violations of Taiwan's airspace and territorial waters. Indeed, on 6 August Meng Xiangqing, professor at the PLA's National Defense University, for example [asserted](#) to state media that the exercises had "completely broke through the so-called 'median line of the strait'". This, as Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu [noted](#) on 9 August, effectively ends "the long-standing tacit agreement on the median line of the Taiwan Strait" that had held for decades. That China will look to normalise this was underlined by the comments of the spokesman for the PLA ETC, Shi Yi, on 10 August. While noting that the current exercises had been successfully concluded, Shi [asserted](#) that China would "continue to carry out military training for war preparedness, and organize normalized combat-readiness security patrol in the Taiwan Strait to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".

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The death of Ayman al-Zawahiri

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's chief lieutenant and successor as leader of al Qaeda, was [killed](#) by a Hellfire missile launched from a US drone in the Afghan capital Kabul on 31 July. President Joe Biden informed the American public of the strike during a televised [address](#) on 1 August noting that the successful mission demonstrated that "no matter how long it takes, no matter where you hide, if you are a threat to our people, the United States will find you and take you out". In the midst of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine and Chinese military posturing in the Taiwan Strait, al-Zawahiri's death did not dominate news cycles as perhaps it would have in the recent past. Nonetheless the al Qaeda leader's death carries with it important implications that bear consideration namely the meaning of his death for al Qaeda and its various affiliates and what his death means for the United States.

Al-Zawahiri's death and al Qaeda: Ever since Osama bin Laden's death in the US raid on his Abbottabad compound in Pakistan in 2011 Zawahiri had assumed the unquestioned position of 'amir' of al Qaeda. However al-Zawahiri's tenure as al Qaeda's Number 1 encompassed a challenging time for the organization. Assuming the leadership months after the outbreak of the Arab Spring that challenged authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East, al-Zawahiri and al Qaeda initially [struggled](#) to remain relevant as the uprising's appeared to demonstrate that bin Laden's core argument that only violent struggle could precipitate political and social change in Muslim societies was false. The relatively swift reassertion of authoritarian regimes between 2011–2013 however provided a window of opportunity for al Qaeda and its various affiliates to reposition themselves at the centre of the region's struggles. The [failure](#) of the Arab Spring "restored the potency of the terror organization's arguments, while the distraction or disintegration of state security agencies" gave it operational breathing room [permitting](#) a number of al Qaeda affiliates (e.g. al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) to expand their influence.

The descent of Syria into insurgency and sectarianism, however, [presented](#) al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) with the opportunity to expand its hyper-sectarian form of jihadism resulting in the creation of Islamic State of Syria and al Sham (ISIS) in 2013/14. al-Zawahiri's [emphasis](#) on the need for jihadi "unity" and "general lack of interest in outbidding violence enabled al Qaeda to portray itself to its supporters and potential recruits as the more reliable jihadi front opposite the Islamic State". This precipitated a formal break between AQC and ISIS in 2014 on the [basis](#) of both strategic and operational differences notably al-Zawahiri's preference for a focus on the "far enemy" (ie. the West) and an attenuation of attacks on fellow Muslims.

For [several prominent analysts](#) Al-Zawahiri's legacy for al Qaeda is thus a mixed one. While al-Zawahiri was widely known, Colin P. Clarke [notes](#), he lacked bin Laden's charisma and was primarily an ideologue who's "plodding and pedantic style was often the subject of ridicule, even among other jihadists" more interested in setting the broad strategic direction than day-to-day operational management of al Qaeda activities. Some [note](#) in this regard that he "did provide strategic direction to al-Qaeda, helping keep it focused on the United States and the West, at least in rhetoric" and oversaw the development of "stronger presence in Africa than it did before 9/11" for the organisation. However his tenure at the top also [witnessed](#) increasing decentralization and delegation of "responsibility for operational planning to affiliates" with the result that now many al Qaeda affiliates "carry out attacks and wage insurgency independently from al Qaeda's senior leadership". As such, [Daniel Byman](#) concludes "they pose a danger to regional stability,

and governments fighting them deserve assistance, but the risk to the U.S. homeland is far less than when bin Laden directed a more global movement”.

Significance of al-Zawahiri's death for the United States: In an immediate sense, the successful operation to kill al-Zawahiri exacts American retribution against the man often [seen](#) as the ideological inspiration behind bin Laden and al Qaeda's strategy of attacking the “far enemy”. More broadly however al-Zawahiri's death represents an opportunity to consider the relative importance and success of the “global war on terrorism” (GWOT) in American national security policy and strategy. For some, the al-Qaeda leader's death [draws](#) a line under the GWOT as it “marks the closing of a chapter of U.S. counterterrorism activity, and the transition to a newish era of internationally oriented American CT—one that is less and less about 9/11 with each passing day and more about curtailing the external power projection capabilities of key networks, ensuring regional stability, limiting the capabilities and influence of regional outfits”. For other observers, the fact that he was killed in an affluent section of Kabul apparently sheltered by prominent members of the Taliban government [suggests](#) the ultimate futility of the GWOT, given that it was launched in the first place by the George W. Bush administration in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to root out jihadists from their safe haven in Afghanistan.

Be that as it may the administration, and some prominent [commentators](#), have represented the strike as a vindication not only of President Biden's decision to pull all US forces out of Afghanistan last year but of its counterterrorism strategy more broadly. In this latter respect the administration has argued that its “[over the horizon](#)” counterterrorism strategy – based on launching “surgical strikes” and special operations raids from outside any given state – permits it to keep US interests and citizens safe without the large-scale, “boots on the ground” commitments that bedevilled the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. While such an approach will continue to enable the US to take out high-value targets it will not necessarily address the broader challenge of preventing al Qaeda and its various affiliates from establishing footholds in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

This is likely to be the case given the decentralisation and regionalisation of al Qaeda over the past decade or more. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's strategy of attacking the “far enemy”, Hassan Hassan [argues](#), may have gained them notoriety both in the minds of their adversaries and jihadists but “even the most unhinged recognize not only that his tactics achieved nothing but also that they came with considerable costs”, through over a decade or more of concerted US and allied focus on drone strikes and targeted operations against al Qaeda's leadership. Those jihadist groups that focused on fighting the “far enemy”, he [concludes](#), “lost, while those who focused on dominating the local scene - such as the Taliban – “prospered”. This should be of concern for the US given the [apparent](#) reconsolidation of al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the past few years. Thus although al-Zawahiri is now dead, al Qaeda affiliated jihadists may find fertile ground once more in localised conflicts.

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Russia suspends nuclear weapons inspections

The decision by the Kremlin to [pause nuclear weapons inspections](#) under the New START framework is another escalation in Russian brinkmanship against the Biden administration that has prompted discussion and debate about Moscow's motives. On the one hand, it could be argued that closing off visibility and transparency over nuclear stockpiles is a significant step towards opaque proliferation and a [prelude to arms racing](#), in which the Putin regime effectively tears up agreements with the US that have been an important part of strategic clarity between the two powers: what some call the [last surviving](#) pillar of nuclear arms control. Removing that component from the Russia-US relationship is – under that reading – a [dangerous step](#). At the height of the Cold War nuclear arms agreements focused on providing clarity, with access to each side's nuclear weapons stockpiles an important [confidence building](#) mechanism, establishing guardrails over the most deadly elements of Soviet-American strategic competition.

An alternative view is that this means little if anything for a relationship that is already badly damaged and shows little if any signs of recovery any time soon. It is notable that part of Russia's official reasons for suspending inspections has been ongoing concerns about the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, and the language of the announcement merely frames the decision as a 'pause'. And although the pandemic explanation is likely little more than a smokescreen, Russia is running out of tit-for-tat responses to US and Western sanctions. Hence the decision could easily be seen as another sign of Russian displeasure, but ultimately a temporary one.

As with many things, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle of these two viewpoints. It is certainly the case that even when the relationship between Russia and the US was at a nadir during the [Obama Administration](#), reciprocal monitoring and inspections arrangements under the 2010 New START agreement were never suspended, and in fact the treaty was [renewed](#) by Putin and Biden for five years days before it was due to expire in 2021. During this period the Kremlin also began integrating [simulated nuclear strikes](#) as part of its major annual military exercises as a way to make its displeasure with the state of the relationship clear.

But it is also more likely that the latest step by Moscow amounts to not much more than aggressive signalling for the moment. It is effectively communicating to the US that the Putin regime is prepared to slaughter one of the few sacred cows contributing to strategic nuclear stability, or at least threaten to do so. And in any case, it is likely that the US would be able to acquire information using other means if Russia were indeed considering making alterations to its nuclear stockpile. In the end, then, it is ultimately an issue that needs to be seen in the overall context of Russia's war in Ukraine, as well as Western responses to it.

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The Defence Strategic Review

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

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

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

Another risk is that we fall into the trap of assuming strategic constancy: in other words, believing that what has worked before will work in the future. Making strategy is always a series of bets, but we also need to

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plan for strategic shocks. At present much of our defence planning rests on the [assumption](#) that the United States will remain prepared to militarily contest China for regional supremacy, including close to the Chinese mainland.

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

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

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

Are there other options? Given that many commentators are offering opinions about what the Defence Strategic Review might focus on, we will use this medium to shamelessly advance our own suggestion. We believe that one alternative here is to develop the capacity to [deter by denial](#), rather than by punishment. In other words, this envisages that ADF should be sufficiently equipped to make Australia a tough nut for China to crack – so much so that it is not worth the effort. At the same time, a network of security partnerships with like-minded actors in the region (what has been called 'nodal' defence) spreads the overall task of managing regional security and ensures Australia remains regionally integrated, not potentially isolated.

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

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