

The Listening Post

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Welcome to Issue 13 of *The Listening Post*, the Centre for Defence Research's 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. 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:

- Australia's domestic national security debate
- whether the Sino-Russian relationship is a nascent alliance
- other issues on our radar
- Macron's visit to China
- US defence leaks

Australia's national security debate heats up

Australians tend to be fairly sanguine about national security choices. The nation has a rich tradition of security policy [bipartisanship](#), characterised by a fairly self-evident set of strategic choices. These revolve around the need to ensure Australia remains a prosperous, liberal maritime-trading state given the challenges of a large territory and a relatively small population.

Absent major security contests in our region, Australia's national security debate has naturally tended to tinker around the margins. It has focused on how to best support the US alliance rather than questioning the basic rationales for it; discussed issues of scope (whether we are a global power with regional interests, or a regional power with global interests); exhibited some [lingering tensions](#) between geography and identity, most notably over how much Australia should see itself as an Asian nation; debated whether to adopt a forward defence or continental defence of Australia posture; and puzzled over what role, and how much



emphasis, Australia should place on engagement in the South Pacific.

The shift in Australia's geostrategic circumstance – from being located in a relative backwater to firmly within the zone of major power contestation between China and the US – has changed this dynamic markedly. The recent history of this is common knowledge: the view that Australia could maintain strong economic relations with Beijing while looking to the US to uphold the regional security order has been increasingly tested by a more muscular Chinese approach under Xi Jinping. Australia's decision to push back against China's destabilising behaviour saw it repeatedly punished by its major trading partner. And, whereas the relationship has begun to thaw following the election of the Albanese government, two things are clear. First, a return to ['business as usual'](#), as defined in the early years of the twenty-first century, is not possible. Second, the China challenge and the US response, will continue to shape Australian security and defence policy choices for the foreseeable future.

It is against this backdrop that we recently witnessed two major interventions into Australia's national security debate. It began with the publication of the ['Red Alert'](#) series of articles in the Nine Entertainment Company of newspapers, most notably the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. Featuring a graphic depiction of silhouetted warplanes looming ominously [over the horizon](#) from Red China, the articles purported to be able to predict what the first 72 hours of war with China would look like, using Taiwan as the trigger. The articles listed the reasons Australians were unready for major conflict in their immediate geostrategic neighbourhood and sought to identify a list of 'solutions' to prepare Australia for war.

It seems that the intention of the series was to shape Australian views by pointing out the real possibility of conflict in our region in the near future (the 'Red Alert' series put the timelines at three years, without really explaining how or why this was chosen). However, if this was the case it backfired spectacularly. The series was roundly [criticised](#) for hysterically assuming war was inevitable, not involving any China experts, cherrypicking worst-case scenarios, presenting a cartoonish and old-fashioned view of contemporary conflict, and offering unimaginative and politically toxic solutions – such as bringing back conscription and basing US nuclear weapons on Australian territory.

In many respects, the 'Red Alert' articles are a good example of how legitimate attempts to perform public messaging on a critical national security issue can thoroughly miss the mark. By adopting a speculative future-oriented tone, with a preference for telling a story that is only one among many possibilities, the series was always vulnerable to claims of warmongering and creative writing rather than evidence-based analysis.

Another unfortunate ramification of the articles was that, in addition to making Australian strategic policy commentary appear superficial and shrill, it once again fell into the trap of seeking to polarise rather than unite. This has been an [unfortunate tendency](#) in domestic security debates, where those who agree with a muscular Australian response to China are identified as patriotic and morally righteous, while those who favour a more measured approach are chastised as either unwitting or deliberate amplifiers of Beijing's propaganda. Given many [Australian experts](#) on China fall into the moderate camp, having their loyalty questioned by those without detailed subject matter knowledge prompts them to push back as well. The [upshot](#) is that national security debates become tribal echo chambers: a dialogue of the deaf in which two sides appear more committed to virtue signalling than engaging in realistic discussion.

This tendency was in full view when former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating returned fire in an address to the National Press Club on 15 March. In a wide-ranging critical commentary about Australian foreign and security policy, Keating lambasted former governments as well as the current one on a variety of topics – from AUKUS to diplomacy in the Pacific, as well as Australia's posture on China and the US alliance. Keating [branded](#) the

decision to acquire SSN's under the AUKUS agreement as 'the worst deal in all history', as it would shackle Australia to US policy choices for the foreseeable future and mark Australia's 'return to our former colonial master'. He stated China was not a threat at all and that Australia had handed its sovereignty to the US. Keating's trademark rhetoric was also directed at Foreign Minister [Penny Wong](#), whom he described as 'running around the Pacific with a lei around her neck'. He called Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Males 'seriously unwise'. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was ridiculed for spending 'less than 24 hours' deciding whether to support the AUKUS pact. But Keating reserved his most stinging barbs for Peter Hartcher, the lead author of the 'Red Alert' series, whom he [branded](#) a 'psychopath' and a 'maniac'.

The upshot of this is Australia is unused to the kind of serious debates over its security choices routinely held in countries that face enduring security challenges. Debates over defence and security posture in South Korea and Poland, for instance, are far more settled than the war scares and mudslinging we have recently witnessed.

It would be unfair to identify a single culprit for the toxic debate that has recently arisen. A combination of factors – from being unfamiliar with a negative threat environment to lax messaging by politicians, as well as unhelpful interventions of the kinds documented above – are all likely part of the mix. Either way, it does a disservice to the many people in Australia's national security policy community working hard to navigate an uncertain strategic landscape. Elsewhere, one of us has made the point that it is about time Australia had a more [mature](#) strategic policy debate. And while this will doubtless occur over time, it will require goodwill on all sides, not to mention a more sophisticated, nuanced and honest approach to discussing our defence and security challenges, for it to come about.

Further reading

Maddison Connaughton, 'AUKUS gets awkward down under', *Foreign Policy*, 24 March 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/24/aucus-australia-submarine-deal-paul-keating/>

Matthew Sussex, 'Time to grow up: Australia's national security dilemma deserves a mature debate', *The Conversation*, 24 March 2023. <https://theconversation.com/time-to-grow-up-australias-national-security-dilemma-demands-a-mature-debate-202040>

Stephen Kuper, 'Let's get real, why are we still listening to Paul Keating?', *DefenceConnect*, 16 March 2023. <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/11615-lets-get-real-why-are-we-still-listening-to-paul-keating>

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Rory Medcalf, 'The AUKUS debate needs clear reasoning, not hot air', *Australian Financial Review*, 28 March 2023. <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/the-aukus-debate-needs-clear-reasoning-not-hot-air-20230322-p5cugo>

China and Russia get a little bit closer

Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March 2023 has prompted a significant amount of renewed speculation about the closeness of the Sino-Russian partnership. Is it a nascent alliance? How much trust is the relationship based on? To what extent is it the product of genuine closeness between Xi and Vladimir Putin? Does it reflect increasingly convergent interests? Does it mean the abandonment of China's semi-neutrality over the war in Ukraine? And what can we expect for the future of the relationship?

Let's begin with what each of the parties were hoping to achieve with respect to the optics of the visit. For Xi's part, the meeting was important for a number of reasons. For one thing, it

was intended to kickstart interest in China's 12-point [peace plan](#) for Ukraine, which had been largely dismissed by the West as being long on aspiration but silent on details. Talking publicly about the resolution of the war – even with Vladimir Putin, its main antagonist – was intended to show both domestic audiences and those in Asia and the Global South that China was keen to play the role of peacemaker. It paved the way, too, for deepening Sino-Russian trade ties, in an [unbalanced](#) relationship in which Russia is a resource option for China, while China is an investment necessity for Russia. Finally, it also allowed Xi to frame the visit as a meeting between senior and junior partners, capitalising on Moscow's increasing isolation with a show of quasi-support for a fellow critic of a US-led liberal rules-based order. As an exercise in demonstrating both personal and national power, Xi's meeting with Putin was therefore an important event on the global stage, reinforcing his unanimous selection as [President](#) for a third term at the 14th National People's Congress on 10 March.

If the optics were good for Xi, they were decidedly mixed for Putin. Certainly, the Russian President scored some domestic attention from meeting Xi at a time when Russia has fast been running out of friends – particularly following the UN General Assembly [vote](#) in February, which saw 141 member states vote to demand Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine and only seven voting against. The meeting followed up on Putin's typically tedious [State of the Nation](#) speech a few weeks earlier, which had gone to great lengths to reassure Russians the economy remained in good shape. And it also reinforced Putin's tendency to focus on being seen acting as a strong man together with important global leaders as a (virtual) equal.

But the benefits probably stopped there for Putin. As one Russian official anonymously put it in an interview with the [Financial Times](#), 'the logic of events dictates we become a Chinese resource colony. We will be China's major suppliers of everything [...] by the end of 2023 the yuan will be our main trade currency'.

Putin also didn't end up with much in the way of concrete support from Xi. There was no agreement to provide Russia with weapons, for instance. That possibility had been speculated about prior to the meeting and identified as a 'game changer' – not only for the war in Ukraine, but also for China's relationship with the US and other major powers. In the event (and as we [predicted](#) in the lead-up to the meeting), Xi continued his '[straddle diplomacy](#)', offering rhetorical support for Russia's opposition to NATO, but providing little in the way of substance.

This is not to say that the relationship between Russia and China is meaningless. On the contrary, it has become significantly closer and has survived a number of tests in which nationalist preferences could have challenged it, especially the [COVID-19](#) pandemic. We should also not discount the extent to which Xi is personally invested in ensuring a close relationship between Beijing and Moscow. Xi and Putin have met over [40 times](#) during the last decade, and there appears to be genuine warmth between the two. And although Xi and the CCP leadership have doubtless been irritated by Putin's tendency for adventures (including the war in Ukraine), on the issue of long-term strategic fundamentals, China regards Russia as an important plank in its desire to supplant the Western-led order and a partner with whom Chinese interests strongly converge.

Does this mean that the Sino-Russian partnership is best categorised as an [alliance](#)? This depends on whether we adopt a maximalist or minimalist definition of the term. It's certainly the case that some specialists are coming to define it that way – including one [prominent realist](#) scholar – as well as others who foresee a '[DragonBear](#)' union as a logical coming together of two authoritarian nations. Moreover, the two states are cooperating on military exercises both on land and water, including in the Mediterranean and the [South China Sea](#). The trade relationship, although heavily weighted in Beijing's favour, continues to grow. Both leaders routinely profess their admiration for one another and their friendship. And they share a common view that the US-led order is outmoded and sclerotic, with Asia set to take over as the geoeconomic and geostrategic centre of global gravity.

However, questions remain about just how much the Sino-Russian partnership embodies the cornerstone of alliances: actual coordination on strategic policy. At present there is little hard evidence of it. If anything, China has recently been undermining Russian security preferences, especially in [Central Asia](#). Russia is also not above seeking alternatives to China, including by courting nations like [Vietnam](#), with whom China has an icy history. Unlike the NATO alliance, there is no mutual defence clause between the two, although admittedly those are rare (not even ANZUS has one). And while Xi has the best access to the Russian leadership of any global leader, this does not (yet) translate to the ability to dictate its policy choices.

So perhaps a better question to ask is whether China would come to Russia's aid if it were attacked. The somewhat unhelpful answer is: it depends. Certainly, China is currently not doing much to help Russia attack another country, although it is providing it with [dual-use](#) materials, and reportedly assault rifles and body armour as well. So while an alliance, an [entente](#) or some other type of strategic compact may well emerge between Russia and China, it is important to recognise it is not without limits, limits set largely in Beijing rather than Moscow, and the relationship – at least for the moment – remains predominantly transactional rather than based on trust. Moreover, if we give in to the temptation of judging such cooperation as a firm partnership based on enduring authoritarian bonds before the evidence supports it – what [Daniel Drezner](#) calls a 'Legion of Doom' – we run the risk of creating one by proxy.

Further reading

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/xi-and-putin-just-wrapped-up-talks-in-moscow-what-does-it-mean-for-the-war-in-ukraine-and-chinas-global-standing/>

Mikhail Korostikov, 'Xi in Moscow: Russia gives China a glimpse of its own future', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 24 March 2023.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89374>

Lily McElwee, Maria Snegovaya, Alexandra Chopenko and Tina Dolbaia, 'Xi goes to Moscow: a marriage of inconvenience?', *CSIS commentary briefs*, 28 March 2023.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/xi-goes-moscow-marriage-inconvenience>

Also on our radar...

French President Emanuel Macron's visit to China

The French leader took a 3-day state visit to China in April, where he was treated to an extravagant display of pageantry and a red-carpet welcome by Xi Jinping.

A number of Macron's statements raised eyebrows during his visit, including the claim that the EU should not be a 'vassal' and must avoid being drawn into a clash between the US and China.

He also spoke of the need for French 'strategic autonomy', noting that 'it would be a trap for Europe' to get involved in conflicts that are 'not ours'. This has

prompted speculation about the tightness of US-French ties, as well as concerns over the issue of China in European foreign and security policy.

Further reading

J Alex Tarquino, 'Macron's China trip is a fool's errand', *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/06/macron-france-china-visit-pension-protests/>

Bloomberg, 'China's Xi courts France's Macron in bid to drive wedge between Europe and US', *Time*, 5 April 2023. <https://time.com/6268777/xi-macron-china-europe-wedge/>

US intelligence leaks

The Pentagon has confirmed that a number of highly classified documents have been leaked to Discord, a server popular with the gaming community. Some of these have been circulating for months. There is concern that the material may compromise sources and be even more damaging than the Snowden leak, given the information the documents contain is so recent.

Many of the documents concern the war in Ukraine – including armaments delivery schedules, readiness reports, battle assessments, intelligence sharing and casualty assessments. One document that listed estimated Russian and Ukrainian casualties had been crudely Photoshopped, swapping the higher number of Russian casualties with the lower Ukrainian tally.

Other documents include details of US intelligence assessments about the policy and posture of key allies. The Pentagon has identified a culprit, Jack Teixeira, a 21-year-old Air National Guardsman. . DFAT has issued a 'please explain'.

This is damaging on a number of levels: it affects the significant trust that has been built up between the US and Ukraine to facilitate information sharing over the most sensitive matters; it will be embarrassing with respect to candid US assessments of allies' intentions (as well as the use of intelligence resources to obtain them); it casts doubt over the effectiveness of US information security; and it will require a costly and time-consuming effort to put in place more robust systems for information management.

Further reading

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Lara Seligman, 'Pentagon officials shocked by intel leaks' *Politico*, 10 April 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/10/pentagon-shocked-leak-classified-plans-00091278>.

