

The Listening Post

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Welcome to Issue 12 of *The Listening Post*, the Centre for Defence Research's monthly digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts on global, regional and Australian defence and strategic issues that have been published over the course of the month. *The Listening Post* provides an easy access repository of articles, commentary and analysis on major defence and strategic policy issues, 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:

- the prospects for Sino-US relations in 2023
- the latest from the war in Ukraine
- some (but not all!) of the issues on our radar, which will be a new feature in *The Listening Post* throughout 2023.

Prospects for Sino-US relations in 2023: embracing a zero-sum game

The cancellation of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's official trip to Beijing in the wake of the Chinese [surveillance balloon](#) controversy provides an opportune moment to both take stock of the current state of Sino-US relations and examine potential pathways forward for what is arguably the most important bilateral relationships in international politics.

While 2022 ended with both Washington and Beijing reiterating in official meetings – such as Xi and Biden's [meeting](#) in Bali on 14 November – their shared desire to keep channels of communication open, there were few practical signs of improvement in relations. Indeed, the prevailing [nature](#) of the relationship is of 'mutual distrust and recrimination', as both parties 'continue to pursue policies that appear aimed more at competition and confrontation than at pursuing avenues for cooperation'.

Each sides' approach to the other is arguably [framed](#) by a 'presumption of malice', which makes both parties increasingly perceive the relationship in zero-sum terms. One increasingly obvious pattern is the premium each state is placing on 'competing'



with the other. This is having negative effects not only on their broader foreign policy but also upon their respective domestic politics.

The irony for the US is the Biden administration's focus on 'competition' is making the US [become](#) more like its adversary: 'nationalist, fixated on security, and politicizing the market economy'.

It is clear that a 'hawkish' bipartisan consensus on China and increasingly [negative](#) views of China amongst the American public have consolidated since President Biden took office. In this context, Beijing is [viewed](#) as a malign, underhanded and dangerous actor, which 'if not countered by American-led efforts, would fundamentally endanger American interests and livelihoods as China rewrites the rules of the "liberal international order"'.

In response to the emergent bipartisan consensus on China, the Biden administration has laid down a policy approach that has attempted to signal its appetite to 'resume' global leadership – after the chaotic Trump years – with a simultaneous commitment to 'out compete' China to 'win the 21st century'. The fulcrum of this approach, as the Council of Foreign Relations' Ian Johnson [notes](#), is to invest at home and align with allies abroad 'who oppose China's vision of authoritarian-based development' as a means of upholding the 'rules-based international order'.

A core problem for the administration is that measures taken to ensure the US can out compete China are likely to undermine its capacity to achieve its objective of revitalising American global leadership of the rules-based order.

Indeed, the administration's concrete [actions](#) towards China have been characterised by bolstering existing allies, such as Japan and Australia (e.g. through AUKUS), and attempts to forge deeper ties with non-allied but aligned actors, such as India and Taiwan. While, at the same time, they have been pursuing an unprecedented decoupling of [high-tech trade](#) with China, including overtly [protectionist](#) trade and industrial policies aimed at boosting American competitiveness in the context of bilateral Sino-US relations.

For all the administration's use of orthodox liberal internationalist rhetoric – for instance, its [2022](#) National Security Strategy's assertion of America's continued commitment to, and reliance on, 'fair and open trade' and a liberal 'international economic system' for its prosperity – the steps taken vis-a-vis China demonstrate such objectives are being sacrificed on the altar of 'strategic competition' with Beijing.

While this aligns with prevailing domestic political sentiment in the Congress, it remains to be seen how this will enable the administration to achieve its associated objective of rallying allies and like-minded partners to the cause of combating China. This is especially important in Asia, where many [observers](#) have noted the [shortcomings](#) of US economic and trade policy for at least the past decade: especially around the failure to match the Belt and Road Initiative, as well the lack of US participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). US schemes around investment in the region have also been long on aspiration and short on delivery, including both the Trump administration's 'Blue Dot Network', and Biden's 'Build Back Better World'.

For China, while the CCP is arguably more ideologically girded for such zero-sum competition, overt competition with the US has nonetheless exacerbated existing pathologies in both its foreign and domestic policy, resulting in a variety of self-inflicted wounds. For instance, it is perhaps no surprise Sino-US strategic competition has coincided with the rabid jingoism of '[wolf warrior](#)' diplomacy, which has damaged China's standing throughout the world. Such assertive, nationalistic posturing has undermined some of Beijing's previous gains in [posing](#) as an advocate of economic globalisation and 'interconnectivity' during the Trump era of American foreign policy.

Additionally, although the CCP's quest for [security](#) both in an international and domestic setting has been a defining feature under Xi Jinping's leadership, it has been markedly sharpened in the past two years. In fact, the CCP's connection of increased pressure/tension in China's external environment and its domestic security was amply displayed during the 20th Party Congress in November 2022. Xi pointedly underscored the challenges to China's security, [warning](#) the country was entering 'a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent' and the Party 'must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms'.

In this context, Xi maintained that the [application](#) of a 'holistic approach to national security' would be required, in which the Party would have 'the people's security as our ultimate goal, political security as our fundamental task, economic security as our foundation, military, technological, cultural, and social security as important pillars, and international security as a support'. While not entirely new, this framing was much more explicit in asserting the links between the 'political security' of the CCP, domestic 'stability' and the achievement of Xi's great objective of 'national rejuvenation'.

The pre-eminence of this focus on regime security has been evident since the Party Congress, most particularly in the sharp [about face](#) on Xi's signature 'Covid zero' approach to pandemic control. Prompted by widespread [protests](#) against draconian lockdowns in November 2022, the sharp reversal of pandemic control policy not only removed a policy that had [placed](#) Xi 'in the firing line of anti-government or anti-party movements' but also had contributed to the Party-state's [need](#) to create conditions to kickstart the Chinese economy from its Covid-induced slow down. As such, this amounted to a tactical shift rather than a fundamental reappraisal of Xi's political program and it shouldn't be taken as a sign of 'liberalisation'.

This was reinforced by Xi's [remarks](#) to the first plenum of the new CCP Central Committee in November (but only published on 31 December 2022), where he asserted:

history has repeatedly proven that using struggle to seek security leads to the survival of security, while using compromise to seek security leads to the death of security; and that using struggle to seek development leads to the flourishing of development, while using compromise to seek development leads to the decline of development.

Thus, despite the pressures of self-inflicted wounds from wolf warrior diplomacy and Covid zero, Xi appears firmly [committed](#) to the core foreign and domestic policy settings that have characterised his tenure to date.

Both Washington and Beijing therefore appear set on trajectories that will lock in rather than ameliorate bilateral tension and competition.

Further reading

Paul Heer, 'US–China rapprochement will not come quickly', *The National Interest*, 19 January 2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/us-china-rapprochement-will-not-come-quickly-206132>

Gabriel Dominguez, 'No improvement in sight: China–US rivalry to further intensify in 2023', *Japan Times*, 6 January 2023. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/01/06/asia-pacific/china-us-relations-2023/>

Gavin Bade, "'A sea change": Biden reverses decades of Chinese trade policy', *Politico*, 26 December 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/26/china-trade-tech-00072232>

Philip Mousavizadeh, 'The Biden administration's China policy: an inventory of actions to address the challenge', *Just Security*, 8 July 2022. <https://www.justsecurity.org/82252/the-biden-administrations-china-policy-an-inventory-of-actions-to-address-the-challenge/>

Neil Thomas, 'Where Does Xi Jinping Go from Here?', *China File*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/where-does-xi-jinping-go-here>

The war in Ukraine

Many commentators mistakenly referred to a '[stalemate](#)' in Ukraine over the winter. On the contrary, it is clear the situation in the main points of interest – especially around the city of [Bakhmut](#) – remains fluid. Renewed offensive operations in December 2022 and January 2023 saw Russian forces finally capture the town of [Soledar](#), a key stepping-stone towards Bakhmut and part of its efforts to pocket the Ukrainian forces that continue to grimly defend the city. There have also been reports of the Wagner PMO using large numbers of contract soldiers. It is estimated a sizeable number of Wagner's recruits from Russian jails [have perished](#) or been captured in human-wave attacks, which have subsequently been followed up by regular Russian forces.

The determination of Wagner's chief, Yevgenyi Prigozhin, to capture Bakhmut has its roots in the ongoing infighting within Russia's security services. The replacement in mid-January of theatre commander [Sergey Surovikin](#) with Russia's leading military figure, General Valery Gerasimov, has been interpreted as a warning by Putin that he is losing patience with Russia's 'official' armed forces. Putting Gerasimov in charge is the clearest demonstration yet from the Kremlin that it is both highly invested in the war and not above offering up one of the most prominent members of the Russian military if things do not go to plan.

But Gerasimov and Prigozhin have long been at odds, and the Wagner leader has been keen to show that his forces are highly effective. [Wagner propaganda](#) – featuring tours of captured towns, touting its ability to capture territory, as well as the opening of its new [offices in St Petersburg](#) – has now been added to the gruesome videos of Wagner personnel executing deserters [with sledgehammers](#). The intention is clearly to portray the organisation as a rival to Russia's regular army and one with more commitment to achieving the results Putin has set for the war.

Other developments in the war over the December–January period included the highly effective use of [HIMARS](#) and drone munitions against targets in Donetsk, as well as Russian airfields. In early December, a Ukrainian drone strike against Russia's [Engels airbase](#) was notable for two reasons. One was that it has been a hub for Russian long-range bombers firing stand-off cruise missiles against Ukrainian infrastructure targets. The second was to highlight the capacity of Ukraine to perform counterstrikes deep into Russian territory; Engels is near the city of Saratov, some 730 kilometres south-east of Moscow, and a significant distance from the border with Ukraine.

Meanwhile, poor Russian operational security and organisation was once again on show when Ukrainian forces struck a [Russian barracks](#) housing a large number of mobilised soldiers. Reportedly this was by [geolocating](#) it via the open Ukrainian cell-phone network, which Russian forces persist in using to communicate with friends and family over social media. The fact that the barracks was perplexingly located next to a large munitions dump (which exploded) was another ongoing indication of bad leadership at the mid-level of Russia's armed forces.

In terms of Western support for Ukraine, the main topic of debate during January 2023 was over the supply of main battle tanks to Kyiv. Germany had been [holding up](#) the transfer of

Leopard 2 tanks by Poland and Finland, both of which ran afoul of defence re-export regulations giving Berlin the ability to veto the deal. This was a significant sticking point given that the Leopard 2 is the armoured mainstay of many NATO armies, with over [2,000](#) of the tanks in service across Europe. The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz initially claimed he would allow German Leopards to be transferred to Ukraine if the Biden administration donated some of its M1-A1 Abrams tanks as well. In doing so, Scholz attempted to [deflect criticism](#) of German intransigence by highlighting American reticence to supply tanks to Ukraine. Whereas the UK tried to get the ball rolling by announcing it would send [14 Challenger tanks](#) to Kyiv, the impasse was ultimately broken when Scholz relented under significant pressure, and the US also agreed to supply Kyiv with 31 [downscaled versions](#) of its Abrams tank (although not for about another 12 months or so).

Berlin's about-face led to a cascade effect. The net result has been around 300 modern battle tanks have [been pledged](#) to Ukraine from a variety of NATO members, and France mulling the prospect of sending some of its [Leclerc tanks](#) as well. This is a highly significant step by the alliance. NATO armour is regarded as being considerably superior to both the T-72 and T-80 and, while unlikely to tip the balance firmly in Ukraine's favour, they will be important in allowing the Ukrainian armed forces to resume their counteroffensives in the south, as well as in helping blunt the expected spring surge in Russian offensive operations.

The next item on Kyiv's wish list – multi-role fighters – is likely to prove a tougher nut to crack; already both Germany and the US have announced they will not supply Ukraine with [F-16s](#). And yet the issue of tanks seems to be something of a turning point in terms of the overall hardening of Western resolve. On the one hand, it signals a realisation that continually drip-feeding weapons to Ukraine in an ad hoc manner may well help to keep it in the fight, but ultimately will not enable it to liberate its territory. That leaves the West open to the criticism that it is merely prolonging the war – and the casualties that flow from it – for little benefit to Ukraine or its own interests. On the other hand, it also demonstrates that now NATO leaders seem to be prepared to go further than making statements about the desirability of Ukraine retaking the land seized by Russia, and are ready to provide at least some of the resources Ukraine needs to accomplish that objective.

However, this shift in NATO's position will also need to be driven by a [clearer sense](#) of what it is trying to achieve in respect to the war in Ukraine, both in terms of the outcome of the conflict, and Ukraine's role in upholding regional security in the war's aftermath. A number of observers have pointed out the lack of a coherent NATO strategy. Put simply, NATO needs a clearer picture of what Russian defeat (and Ukrainian victory) looks like; how that might be achieved, given direct participation in hostilities will remain a red-line; and how NATO should treat both Ukraine and Russia once its mission has been accomplished. At the very least, discussions about rapidly increasing stocks of arms will now take on a new urgency: a reality recently underscored by the Polish government's announcement it would increase military spending from 2.5% of GDP (which is already a significant amount relative to other EU economies) to an [even more considerable](#) 4%. This will not only have an effect on helping Warsaw bolster its own deterrent capabilities: indeed, it will also shift the contours of where influence in NATO sits, on the sheer basis of capability acquisition alone.

Finally, there have been relatively limited developments on the Russian home front. Kremlin propaganda has continued its descent into unintentional self-parody, as state media figures have compared German officials [to the Third Reich](#), made more lurid claims about the [degenerate West](#), and exhorted Russia to stand firm against Western 'woke' imperialism. But beneath the theatrics, there are clearly significant concerns that the Kremlin is planning another [round of mobilisation](#), potentially on a similar scale to the 300,000 conscripts it announced would be drafted in October 2022. Even if that takes the form of 'shadow' conscription – forcing military-age Russians to the front without an official announcement – it will be difficult for Putin to avoid including residents of Moscow and St Petersburg (the most affluent parts of Russia and home of its elites) on this occasion. This will have potential

implications for political discontent, especially if Russian military defeats and personnel losses continue to mount up.

Further reading

Raphael Cohen and Gian Gentile, 'Is the US military capable of learning from the war in Ukraine?', *Foreign Policy*, 2 February 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/02/us-military-lessons-war-ukraine-russia-weapons-tactics/>.

Michael Kofman and Ryan Evans, 'Manpower, Materiel and the Coming Decisive Phase in Ukraine', *War on the Rocks*, 23 January 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/manpower-materiel-and-the-coming-decisive-phase-in-ukraine/>.

Bart Szewczyk, 'The West Needs a Strategy for Russia after Putin', *Foreign Policy*, 20 January 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/20/russia-ukraine-war-europe-strategy-defeat-collapse-after-putin/>.

Jack Watling, 'Russia through the Kremlin's Eyes', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 January 2023. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-through-kremlins-eyes>.

Also on our radar...

Continuity and change in Japan's defence and security posture under Kishida

- In December 2022, the government of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio released Japan's new National Security Strategy (NSS).
- The NSS demonstrates that the regional security environment has become more concerning from Tokyo's perspective, characterised by continued North Korean nuclear brinkmanship, Chinese military modernisation and attempted coercion of Taiwan (and Japan), and Sino-Russian alignment.
- Simultaneously however, the NSS remains embedded in Japan's post-1945 defence-oriented mindset, which has informed the NSS's focus on obtaining credible deterrent capabilities.

Further reading

Stephen Nagy, 'Pragmatic realism, Japan's new National Security Strategy, and its implications for Australia', *Australian Outlook*, 16 January 2023. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/pragmatic-realism-japans-new-national-security-strategy-and-its-implications-for-australia/>

Nori Katagiri, 'Japan's new defense policy signals more continuity than change', *World Politics Review*, 27 January 2023. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/kishida-japan-pacifism-military-china-tensions-defense-budget/?one-time-read-code=183762167515938835236>

The Defence Strategic Review approaches

- By the time this edition of *The Listening Post* lands (it's being prepared in late January/ early February), the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) will have been announced, therefore don't want to waste our readers' time by speculating about the contents of the review.
- However, you can rest assured we will dissect the review and many of its implications in the next *Listening Post*.
- In the meantime, we have some further readings below that can be compared with the actual document when it lands.

Further reading

Mick Ryan, 'A report into Australia's military is about to be handed down', *ABC News*, 31 January 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-31/defence-strategic-review-australia-security-challenges-task/101906242>

Richard Dunley, 'Report from 1945 holds lessons for defence strategic review team', *ASPI Strategist*, 2 February 2023. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/report-from-1945-holds-lessons-for-defence-strategic-review-team/>

Peter Layton, 'Australia's return to must-win wars', *Lowy Interpreter*, 31 January, 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-s-return-must-win-wars>

