

**WITH REFERENCE TO ANY HISTORICAL EXAMPLE, WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS  
FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY?**

“Ask a question”. Academician Lin Woong pointed at the Zhong Xiao<sup>1</sup> on the third row of the tiered auditorium with its 450 strong audience. The unfortunate individual who wore the uniform of the People’s Liberation Army Navy had fidgeted at the wrong moment. The professor had spoken for an hour and the Q and A had already lasted thirty minutes but no-one wanted it to finish. The renowned head of the Department of War Theory and Strategic Research, Professor Lin was a tall and distinguished presence. His sole presentation to the course titled ‘Psychology in the Strategy of Warfare’ had drawn a full house among the mid-ranking students in the Beijing Academy of Military Science who now waited to hear the offender’s question.

“Esteemed Lin Lao, thank you for granting me that honour.” Standing now, the PLA(N) officer continued: “My question is: why did we not use a tactical nuclear weapon against the Australian task group?”

“A fair question from an eager warrior”. The professor stroked one side of the only visual sign of any personal vanity, his well-developed Fu Manchu moustache. The officer sat back down with relief and Lin began to expound his answer, effortlessly combining it with the theme of his lecture. “In English there is a saying, ‘You do not use a sledgehammer to crack a nut’, here we say “to kill a chicken you don’t need the knife you use to slaughter a cow”. He paused. “Let’s just step back in time a little to explain my hypothesis”. He paused for thought then continued. “A good example occurred almost exactly 100 years ago next month in fact, on the tenth of December in 1941. The British Imperialists were dealt a blow which spelt the death knell of their Empire East of Suez. I am talking about what in those days was unthinkable to us, our neighbours and the world in general. The sinking by the Japanese Air Force of a British battleship and a battlecruiser off the coast of the Malayan peninsula in our southern sea. They were the first capital ships to be sunk by air power alone on the high seas. Imagine! Those ships, the King’s ships Prince of Wales and Repulse, two of the greatest symbols of British power across their global empire, dispatched by slow but highly effective torpedo carrying aircraft and bombs.

“How could this have happened? Only 3 days earlier the Japanese war machine had effectively destroyed a static American fleet from the air in Pearl Harbour and on another front they invaded Malaya almost simultaneously. Within just two months they had captured Malaya and Singapore. A Japanese army only a third as strong as the British forces humiliated them. Our own history attests to the effectiveness of those treacherous Japanese forces but back then the West ignored how we were being treated. Well, what went wrong for the British navy? Those two ships and their escorting destroyers had placed their confidence in a land based air force to provide them protection from the air, just as the colonial power had dominated Malays for years by the strength of the British Army on the ground. Why do you think we began to build our own fleet of aircraft carriers”?

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“Because, even if it takes us some time, we Chinese do take on the lessons of history and we learn from the successes and failures of others. It wasn’t just at sea that the British and their intelligence staffs 100 years ago underestimated the Japanese. The whole of the Malayan campaign on land, in the air as well as at sea was a humiliating defeat. Even though they had Japanophiles in their intelligence staff in London, the reality was that a form of military ethnocentrism prevailed in this region of the Empire in regard to their assessment of Japan’s military capabilities. They outnumbered the Japanese by almost three to one on the ground but the British in the whole of Malaya had only 43 Brewster Buffalo fighters. Their air threat against enemy shipping was two squadrons equipped with obsolete Vickers Wildebeest biplane torpedo bombers. The Japanese army alone had an air arm with over 400 aircraft.

“So, Tongzhis, the British had failed. Failed on the intelligence front, failed on the ground, failed in the air and were therefore unable to succeed at sea. Force Z was the name given to the British ships. In command was an admiral who had arrived with his ships in Singapore just 6 days before the Japanese invaded Malaya. You could say he was a ‘desk admiral’ or just unlucky. Originally, the new aircraft carrier Indomitable would have sailed with the force to Singapore, but she had earlier run aground and was not ready to sail with the flagship, the new battleship HMS Prince of Wales, together with the veteran battlecruiser HMS Repulse, and their four destroyers.”

A sip from a glass of water on the podium and Lin continued. “The deployment of the ships was a decision made by their wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill, although, as sometimes happens with politicians, he ignored the warning by his navy chief. Force Z arrived in Singapore just six days before the Japanese landed in Malaya on 8 December 1941. So Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, on board his flagship sailed again. He headed toward reported landings around Kuantan on the East of the Malayan peninsular and soon met his fate. Force Z was sighted and shadowed by an enemy submarine and later aircraft. The Ribēn guǐzi struck at the opportune moment by air with a force of 86 Indochina-based aircraft with bombs and torpedoes. It was said that in those days they also had the world’s best torpedoes. Admiral Phillips went down with his flagship as did his Flag Captain, a man named Leach.”

“A German philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte once wrote that “you cannot remove a single grain of sand from its place without changing something throughout all parts of the immeasurable whole”. If I may digress for a moment, the appointment of Captain Leach to the HMS Prince of Wales had an effect 40 years later as if he himself had been one of Fichte’s grains of sand. His son had been in Singapore and due to join the ship until his father was made the Captain. After that he was re-assigned. That son, then a midshipman or what we call Shao Wei, was forty years later to become the head of the British navy, what before their decline they used to call their ‘First Sea Lord’. It was he, Sir Henry Leach, who singlehandedly persuaded Britain’s first female Prime Minister to go to war with Argentina and recapture the Malvinas Islands. Imagine if he had perished on board the Prince of Wales! However, the Malvinas War and their subsequent history is perhaps a lesson study for another day.”

“Now to come back to the original question asked by my young Zhong Xiao friend. Did the Japanese take the cow knife, or in their case their battle fleet, to slaughter the British Force Z chickens? No. They stood off and used their air power. And when the opportunity arose to defeat

the Australian task group last year, our People's Liberation Army Navy could have used the lessons of history to do the same, thanks once more, to a degree, to their forces' lack of airpower. Now, do you know what fate befell Australia's last aircraft carrier, the Melbourne? No? There is a delicious irony in its final years. In 1985 it was sold for just 1.4 million dollars to our China United Shipbuilding Company and towed here, to China, to Huangpu. What a coup that was for us. The Australians thought they were clever”.

“Before they let it go, they removed its electronics, its weapons, and welded its rudders so we couldn't use it. The beauty was its aircraft catapult, arresting equipment and the mirror landing system were all untouched. For the next few years our army's naval architects and engineers studied everything about them and as the navy members in the audience know, this led to our first training carrier the Liaoning. Today, thanks to Melbourne we have our six type 003 nuclear carriers with catapults as well as two training carriers to replace the Liaoning navy museum ship. We did all this while the Australians dithered and dallied about whether to convert their two small amphibious helicopter docks to carry the F35Bs. Now I imagine they wish they had done so”!

“This brings me back to consider some elements affecting your course title: ‘Psychology in the Strategy of Warfare’. For many decades, as you have heard from other lectures, China under the guidance of our leaders and the party, has recognised the intricate and intertwining relationship between influence, power and commerce. Unlike the West we do not invite the political maelstroms that come with a three to five year election cycle, yet we are a trading nation and to trade effectively at the scale we need to requires the ability to influence those abroad both subtly and sometimes less so. The rapid growth in our economy in the last quarter of last century offered us unforeseen opportunities to expand our influence into Asia and Africa. In our very first Defence White Paper, which my father helped to prepare in 1995, we said “peace does not come easily and thus should be doubly treasured” and that Tongzhis remains as true today as it was then”.

“Economic prosperity and developing our blue water fleets went hand in hand in the last 50 years. The economic hegemony of the United States was always going to be broken as our policies bore fruit and it was essential that militarily we should not be bullied on our path to full development of which the Maritime Silk Road was always an essential element and now, almost 30 years after the revered Xi Jinping introduced the one road one belt initiative it is nearing completion well ahead of the planned 2049 timeline. Crucially, as planned we exported influence. In the last 30 years or so over 75 million of our people have settled abroad, throughout Asia, across Africa and even into South America. Supported by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the industrial complexes that have been set up, through those millions we have the ability to exert economic pressures if and when necessary on so many governments. You remember our success in dividing Europe in the thirties and how the remnants of the EU begged us to prop them up when they entered their depression”?

“Of course no-one had anticipated Donald Trump would be elected twice as the US President at such a crucial time in our expansion. For a while attempts to cripple AIIB and to hamper our

progress like the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement had looked threatening but party politics in democracies limited their progress and attempts to hold us back all failed. Post-Trump antipathy, US debt and the end of the EU helped of course as did the willingness of so many leaders in smaller nations to become personally wealthy from their co-operation with us”.

“So by 2037, Australia was looking pretty isolated and particularly vulnerable. Their ANZUS treaty was never going to be America’s first priority. Look at history – late in two twentieth century wars, failures in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan – were they really going to bail out Australia at the expense of their own economic dependence on China? And could Australia even bloody our noses? They had followed America into every conflict since Vietnam and Australian lives had been the unpopular cost. The loss of life on board their frigate in 2020 after the Iranian swarm attack in the Strait of Hormuz and the US’s lukewarm ‘surgical strikes’ together with a faltering economy had dented Australian public morale”.

“A year earlier and despite several Defence White Papers, there had still been debates raging over the shape of their navy. One expert, Hugo White, suggested 24 or 36 submarines should replace the surface fleet. He argued, correctly as it turned out, that Australia might not be able to rely on the United States to come to its aid if it was attacked. He noted Australia had ‘been very fortunate to live under America’s protection for so long and we will sorely miss it when it has gone.’ I liked his prediction, writing in 2019, that there would be a power shift: ‘the direct result of the biggest change in the global distribution of wealth and power in 200 years which has brought to a close the era of Western domination of East Asia which began with Britain’s industrial revolution—and will end with China’s’”.

“He rightly assessed that Trump’s isolationist position reflected the views of many Americans who would not support a cold war with us or a war to protect Australia or our Taiwan region. He couldn’t offer a reason why we would want to attack Australia but foresaw that if we reached a position of clear military primacy in the absence of the US we would be capable of launching a direct attack. Clearly he hadn’t considered the asymmetric nature of the attack we were to launch twenty years later. I will just read you a direct quote by this Mr White: ‘We can be sure that if China becomes the leading power in East Asia, and even if its power is exercised prudently and sparingly, the coercive power of its armed forces will always be there behind its diplomacy and soft power as it seeks to influence our decisions and actions. This is how hegemony works’.”

“I am just surprised he couldn’t work out why the largest island continent in the world would be such a tempting acquisition for us. Lucky for us no-one listened to him about increasing their air power. We were never going to worry about submarines but if they had doubled their air force and had converted the LHDs or built a carrier or two, then given the distances involved they could perhaps have caused problems. Imagine if the Prince of Wales and Repulse battle group had their modern carrier with them. Their chances of survival would have been greatly increased. The Australian Labor governments of 2025-2031 as the Americans say, talked the talk but didn’t walk the walk on Defence”.

“The last six of the planned 12 Attack class of submarines were cancelled in 2029 and only 4 were operational by the time our forces landed on Australian soil. Of the eleven escorts only 7 were operational and our Fiji feint was a successful attempt to lure the bulk of them away from Australia. With their AEGIS systems and powerful surface to air missiles they could have protected Sydney, Perth and Darwin. Likewise, imagine if the LHDs had carried F35Bs and they had gained knowledge of our operation while at sea. As it was the two never became fixed wing carriers and they carried a brigade headquarters and almost two battalions as well as cavalry units toward Fiji”.

“The Australian Navy task group was thousands of kilometers away from home and totally isolated, so why use our SSN with a nuclear torpedo or a standoff tactical nuclear missile, why seek condemnation from Western propagandists when we could write a different and positive narrative? Much easier to inform the Australian public their navy ships and their embarked forces were our guests and, as they all were, would be flown safely home when we were sure the situation in Australia was secure. The order to surrender to the task group by the Australian Prime Minister was a pragmatic one. With their country lost but at peace and their families and their homes safe what did they have left to fight for”?

“The principal weakness in most western democracies was their desire to adhere to this nebulous structure of the international rule of law. Note that population size seems to have some effect here. The USA and India appear less squeamish on this point, witness the USA often not ratifying international treaties and India’s use of nuclear weapons to surgically end their issues with Pakistan in 2027. Those two, like ourselves and Russia still quietly acknowledge ‘might is right’. Indonesia with Papua and Thailand with the Rohingya might also be examples of this allergy to international law. Australia however, since it ended its apartheid immigration policy in the late 1960s became rather a slavish adherent to internationalism in its foreign policy which has been too our advantage”.

“Some of you may not be aware that there have been Chinese people living in Australia since the first half of the nineteenth century, well over 200 years ago. Chinese immigration was an answer to the shortage of labour in the British colony of New South Wales. By 1973 the well named ‘white Australia’ policy was officially over and as relationships thawed so did the opportunities for generations of our sleeper agents to live and work innocently in Australia. The first, as has since been unfortunately revealed, arrived in 1992 but it wasn’t until planning for the Australian Assimilation operation began in 2023 that any were activated for more than general data gathering. Soon after the turn of the century Australia had more than a quarter of a million first and second generation Chinese living in Sydney. So it was not too difficult to have two or three hundred in the right place at the right time a couple of years ago. Air traffic control and the ports were vital careers but so were elements in the federal police and the armed forces, particularly for intelligence gathering. December 29<sup>th</sup> was chosen as assimilation Day after several years study as the day when Australia would be at its most vulnerable. The regular ‘civilian’ planes landed to disgorge their military passengers and take over the airports, the car transporters offloaded the tanks and APCs, the cruise ship “guests” poured off and commandeered locals’ vehicles and buses – a little bit like the way those damned Japanese stole bicycles to cycle their way to victory on the Malayan peninsular. Within 12 hours it was all over and amazingly, with the exception of those two policemen in Darwin, completely bloodless. Tasmania surrendered 48 hours later, without anyone one other than the Consul General landing there.”

“Esteemed comrades, none of this great achievement could have been achieved by a Western democracy. It took nearly 20 years of careful analysis and deliberate multi-agency planning to bring this operation to its successful conclusion. The operational security implemented across several departments would have been impossible. Equally, the exponential development of space technology which allowed the coordination of limited kinetic ASAT and temporary non-kinetic counterspace operations would have been impossible in previous generations. You can all be proud to have witnessed history being made. I know some of you on this course were among the first to land in Australia and you should all live to see the continent finally developed to its maximum potential. I might suggest it is also a most convenient stepping stone for our envisaged exploitation of Antarctica. Now, I have time for one more question but we should avoid one on the continued strategic isolation of the USA as I understand that is the specialist subject of your next presenter”.

## **Lieutenant Commander Chris Watson RAN**

Lieutenant Commander Watson joined the Royal Australian Navy in 2002 following



a career in the Royal Navy. Educated at the Royal Grammar School Lancaster, he is a graduate of the Britannia Royal Naval College, the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and Liverpool University where he gained an honours degree in Political Theory and Institutions. Deployments to the Caribbean and the western seaboard of North and South America were followed after university by an appointment to the frigate AMAZON, before serving as Executive Officer in HMS WALKERTON, a Fishery Protection vessel and Ton-class minesweeper. After a year-long course he served in three frigates as a Principal Warfare Officer. In 1985 he was again aboard AMAZON, serving as her Operations Officer, during the Royal Navy's testing first operational encounter with an Argentinian warship in the South Atlantic following the end of the Falklands War.

At the age of 32, with no previous language experience, he qualified as a Russian Interpreter and was an accredited British diplomat in both Moscow and Warsaw, Poland before in 1989, experiencing the dubious privilege of being the last British Assistant Naval Attaché to be expelled from the former Soviet Union. There followed intelligence related Single and Joint Service staff appointments interspersed with executive positions at sea. These included postings as the Staff Officer Intelligence and the J2 in Gibraltar; Second in Command of the newly commissioned frigate HMS IRON DUKE and the First Lieutenant of HMS OCEAN. OCEAN was the Royal Navy's first and last purpose built amphibious helicopter carrier and Lieutenant Commander Watson was intimately involved in bringing her out of build and into operational service with the Amphibious Task Group, including disaster relief operations in Central America following Hurricane Mitch.

Before joining the Royal Australian Navy he served for 3 years representing the UK as the exchange officer in the Joint Information Operations Center in San Antonio, Texas where, for his work during the Balkans conflict and as the NATO team chief, he became the Center's first allied exchange officer to be awarded the United States Meritorious Service Medal. On moving to Australia he served for three years in the Strategic Operations Division's Joint Plans Directorate as the IO staff officer, then a key organisation responsible to CDF and the Minister for Defence for providing forward planning and operational direction to Australian joint service operations. He then had the honour to be selected to serve in PUSTAKMAR throughout 2006 and 2007.

Lieutenant Commander Watson has deployed operationally to the Solomon Islands, to Iraq and to the Middle East. Proud to be an Australian veteran his awards include an Australian Active Service Medal and campaign medals. His last role in the navy before his initial retirement saw him living with in Japan while serving as Australia's United Nations Liaison Officer to the United States Seventh Fleet on board the Flagship, the USS BLUE RIDGE. In July 2011 Chris left the navy family and moved to reside in Tasmania. Before accepting the privilege to re-join and serve once more in Malaysia between 2013 and 2015, Chris had been enjoying travelling, fishing, stand-up paddle boarding as well as supervising extensive home renovations. Throughout 2017 he served as the Navy desk officer in the Joint Doctrine Directorate before, for a third time serving the Royal Malaysian Navy in Lumut in 2018 and 2019. During his three tours in PUSTAKMAR he has been responsible for coordinating 20 iterations of Command Team Training with over 100 RMN command teams participating and he has also assisted in training several Malaysian international PWO courses. He is married to Linh and they are enjoying their new life together in Lumut, Perak.