

AN ESSAY ON

REDEFINING REGIONAL SECURITY: BUILDING SEA POWER ON VALUES

Is China a military threat to the West? Probably not, but only if you think of war in conventional terms.

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INTRODUCTION

1. It seems as if warfighting and brutality are ever-present and are natural to human beings – described by evolutionary biologist and theorist E.O. Wilson as ‘humanity’s hereditary curse’.² The enduring principles of warfighting enable national security pundits to draw many lessons from the extensive history of human conflict. However, the events of the early 21st century necessitate reassessment of implicit warfighting concepts such as ‘victory’, along with renewed thinking about how Australia might best achieve ‘victory’ with regards to its strategic interest of regional stabilisation. The relative international peace overseen by the global power of the United States, the *Pax Americana*, can no longer be relied upon *in toto* to guarantee the security interests of the Indo-Pacific region. Australia, and in particular the Royal Australian Navy, must prepare to think innovatively with regards to its contribution to the security of the Indo-Pacific, as all indicators suggest that human history is about to experience another major conflict – characterised by the physiognomies of the 21st century³.

THE LOGIC OF 21ST CENTURY CONFLICT

2. The academic discussion seeking to explain why two sets of rival powers came to conflict in 1914 will arguably be never-ending. Political, territorial and economic conflicts, a complex web of alliances and alignments, the interplay between the ideologies of militarism, imperialism and the growth of nationalism, and the power vacuum created by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, are often cited as the major factors. However, at the time, none of the great European powers believed that war was inevitable, rather it was seen *versus* as an unintended consequence of the German and Austria-Hungarian empires taking too many risks based on misperceptions of the intent of the other European powers.⁴ Whatever the causal factor, what cannot remain unheeded is the similarity between the events leading to the First World War and the current relationship between the global superpowers of the 21st century, most notably the United States and China.

3. The stark difference between the global competition of the United States and China, and the great European powers of the early 20th century, is that former do not concern themselves with land or resources, but rather ‘rule-making’. Like the early 20th century; the rules-based global order of the early 21st century is being challenged by both populist governments and violent non-state actors; and the national security environment is constantly changing, becoming increasingly multifarious and influenced by the seemingly endless

¹ Coker, C (2017) *The Improbable War: China, The United States and the Logic of Great Power Conflict*, Hurst & Company, London, p. 87

² Wilson, E O (2012) *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York, p. 62

³ The 21st century thus far has been characterised by the rise of globalisation and consumerism, a mistrust in government (for example, the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union or ‘Brexit’), a deepening global concern over terrorism and an increase in the powers of private enterprise.

⁴ Coker, *op cit.*, p. 44

advances in technology. Consider the following: The United States has become much more vocal about its concerns relating to participation of Chinese firms in critical infrastructure⁵ in the United States, and in countries that benefit from preferential access to its intelligence.⁶ China has responded strongly to actions against its major firms (such as communications multinationals Huawei and ZTE), to the extent that Chinese firms' participation (or lack thereof) in other countries' critical infrastructure development is now widely interpreted as one of the many alignment choices between the two global powers.⁷ The considerations of national security and strategic interests, as much of the current academic discussion about China's growing power and influence to gradually modify the *Pax Americana*, are highly reminiscent of the beliefs held in Europe prior to the First World War.

4. As outlined in the 2016 Defence White Paper, the Australian government's fundamental strategic national interests are directly affected by the stability of the Indo-Pacific region and, in this regard, it calls for a further commitment to reinforcing the United States' efforts to ensuring security in the Indo-Pacific.⁸ In recent times, support from the United States to Japan and Australia, as the two most consequential United States' allies in the region, has 'sharpened' in the Indo-Pacific. The United States has taken many practical measures to re-engage with and re-animate its alliances, for example: rebalancing its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region by deploying fighter aircraft to Japan; basing attack submarines in Guam; and positioning a force of United States Marines in Darwin.⁹ This rebalancing is not intended to create a pretext for China to overreact but is instead designed to assure United States' allies that it will enforce the international rules and norms, if necessary, and remain the preeminent military power in Indo-Pacific region.

5. Despite all of the recent measures taken by the United States, all the lessons of history suggest that it needs to share the burdens of global power, if the world is to avoid replaying the events of 1914. The United States confronts a twofold challenge – avoiding conflict, while still competing as the preeminent global power, and working together with its allies to adapt the current rules-based global order to reduce the burden of global power on itself, relatively speaking. In this regard, now is the opportunity for Australia to push for an Australian / United States co-operative approach to security in the Indo-Pacific. To achieve this, Australia must clearly demonstrate its values to the United States and, most importantly, to the nations of the Indo-Pacific as to why Australia should act in the role as the region's security guarantor.

REDEFINING 'VICTORY'

6. Consider the following question: how could Australia demonstrate to the nations of the region that it's the preferred security guarantor? It can be argued that Australia has preeminent 21st century military assets at its disposal in the event of future conflict; however,

⁵ Critical infrastructure refers to systems and assets that are critical to national security, economic security, or public health or safety that the incapacity or destruction of such systems and assets would have a debilitating impact on those matters.

⁶ For example, 'The Five Eyes' is an anglophone intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. These countries are parties to the multilateral UKUSA Agreement, a treaty for joint cooperation in signals intelligence.

⁷ Biggs, T & Duke, J (2018) China's Huawei, ZTE banned from 5G network, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 2018, p. 1

⁸ Department of Defence (2016) *Defence White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 68

⁹ Smith, E & O'Brien, K (2019) US Marines arriving in Darwin in record numbers to focus on Indo-Pacific stability, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 24 April 2019, p. 1

its theory of victory remains in the industrial age, that is, its ideas about ‘victory’ are inherited from conflicts of the past. Australia must redefine ‘victory’ for the 21st century context. Lessons can be derived from one of the largest military campaigns of Australia’s last major military commitment of the 20th century, namely the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War.¹⁰ It was a campaign of surprise attacks against command and control centres throughout South Vietnam. More than 80,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops struck more than 100 towns and cities and, although the initial attacks stunned the United States and their allies, they quickly regrouped, rebuffed the offensive, and inflicted heavy casualties on the North Vietnamese forces. The Tet Offensive, as was the case with many of the battles in the Vietnam War, was technically a United States victory; however, it was a strategic turning point for the ultimate defeat of the United States and its allies in Vietnam.¹¹

7. The United States had adopted a strategy of attrition against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, attempting to drain them of their manpower and materiel.¹² Their definition of victory was inherited from their conflicts with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan – whilst, for their enemy, the defeat of their ideals of ‘Vietnamese Nationalism’ was not going to be achieved by attrition of manpower and materiel. In this regard, the United States’ definition of victory condemned its military efforts to failure. At its core, challenges by the 21st century China to the global rules-based system are also contesting these traditional definitions of victory. China has demonstrated it is not willing to abide by international law and does not hesitate to act unilaterally in matters it considers critical for its national interests. China’s recent acts of economic and political aggression in Sri Lanka¹³ and the South China Sea¹⁴ are perfect examples of China’s attempts to promote totalitarian absolutism as one of the new global rules.¹⁵ These acts are also redefining the nature of warfighting, promoting new unconventional forms of conflict¹⁶ and has enduringly changed the definition of achieving regional security for Australia and the other nations of the Indo-Pacific that support the current global rules.

A VALUES-BASED GLOBAL ORDER

8. Reiterating the aforementioned question: how could Australia demonstrate that it’s the preferred security guarantor for the nations of the Indo-Pacific? Australia could achieve this by leading discussion and gaining agreeance on what values should be instilled, promoted and defended within the Indo-Pacific region. A values-based relationship that is founded on mutual respect, innovation, honesty and teamwork; and inspires demonstrable benefits that build and deliver sea power with the other nations of the Indo-Pacific. Rather than

¹⁰ The Tet Offensive was launched on January 30, 1968 by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People’s Army of Vietnam against South Vietnam, the United States and its allies.

¹¹ Kerr, G (2015) *A Short History of the Vietnam War*, Oldcastle Books, Harpenden, p. 99

¹² The goal of the United States in the Vietnam War was not to conquer North Vietnam but rather to ensure the survival of the South Vietnamese government. As all the contested territory was theoretically "held" already, instead the U.S. Army used body counts to show their progress towards victory. The Army’s theory was that, eventually, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army would lose after the attrition warfare.

¹³ Sri Lanka’s loans of approximately \$1 billion from China were used as leverage to give China a controlling interest in, and ninety-nine-year lease over, the Hambantota Port. As a result, the perception has formed in the international community that Chinese aid and loans are a ‘trap’ to ultimately serve China’s national interests.

¹⁴ The Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are a major issue in East Asia, prompting military increases from Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea. The issue centres on control on of the islands and surrounding waters in the South China Sea, which are one of the world’s primary shipping lanes and source of natural resources.

¹⁵ Thu, H L (2018) *China’s Aggression is starting to Backfire*, *The National Interest*, 25 July 2018, p. 1

¹⁶ In cyberspace, for example.

legitimising their claims through responsibility and cooperation, China have already demonstrated their disregard and contempt for such values.¹⁷ As commented by Christopher Coker, professor of international relations and author: ‘the only form of global order that can be sustained over the long-term is one based on values.’¹⁸ Therefore, for Australia to be ‘victorious’ in regional security, it must place these values before maintaining the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region and must be prepared to defend these values in order to secure the rules of an international system based on such values.

9. For the Royal Australian Navy, its role in regional security begins with an unadulterated review of its values, and the intrinsic values of the Australian Defence Force¹⁹, and how they are engrained into its engagement into the Indo-Pacific region. The 2017 foreign policy white paper and numerous political media releases have called for ‘increased engagement ... in support of a more resilient region’.²⁰ Several areas within Navy are already involved in regional engagement within the Indo-Pacific, most notably in the form of medical assistance and training. This essay whole heartedly supports the continuation of these courses of action and suggests that these mobile training teams could adopt a broader scope that includes many contemporary combat support functions, including but not limited to: maintenance, logistics, engineering and operational contracting.²¹ That said, the importance of instilling a values-based relationship far surpasses building the technical skills required for the delivery of sea power. Somewhat emblematic of the Victorian era, Navy has the inherent capability to exert and influence the desired values-based cooperative behaviour by its presence alone.²² Furthermore, values-based relationships need to be instilled at the lowest level²³, through sailors and junior officers that exemplify the Navy’s core values and are able to apply these values along with the equally important intangible skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence and outcomes-focused leadership, into their dealings with their Indo-Pacific counterparts.

CONCLUSION

10. The world is on the path to a conflict for which victory cannot be defined by previous conflicts or by what might be considered ‘traditional’ definitions. Competition for strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific region has increased in complexity since the turn of the millennium. In this more complex strategic age, ‘victory’ will be achieved by nations that think laterally and that encourage creative ways to promote their core values with allies and regional partners. This is a time for Navy’s senior leaders to display the courage and innovation they demand of their sailors, or risk losing the opportunity for Navy to shape strategic outcomes in support of Australia’s national security interests in the 21st century.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Coker, op cit., p. 124

¹⁹ The values of the Australian Defence Force are Professionalism, Loyalty, Integrity, Courage, Loyalty, Innovation and Teamwork.

²⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2017) Foreign Policy White Paper, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 44

²¹ G (2019) A Case for a Royal Australian Air Force Mobile Training Team Capability, The Central Blue weblog, p. 1

²² McCoy, A (2018) 21st Century Gunboat Diplomacy: China and America are spawning a new great-power naval rivalry, War is Boring weblog, 10 April 2018, p. 1

²³ Instilling values at the lowest levels ensures that the future senior leaders of Australia’s pacific partners, and indeed the Royal Australian Navy, are embodied with the values, morals and ethics required to operate in the 21st century.

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