

Australian defence strategy, deterrence and the PRC's military posture

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This is the third of a four-part UTS:ACRI Analysis series that examines an interlinked set of questions for Australian defence and strategic policy stemming from the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) released in April 2023. The series began by providing an assessment of the consistency between the stated concept of deterrence at the heart of the DSR and the capability acquisitions (including the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines) that are flagged to implement that strategy. Part 2 examined the broader question of how the defence concept and capabilities detailed in the DSR are aligned with that of Australia's alliance partner, the US. Part 3 now provides an assessment of whether Australian strategy and capabilities are sufficiently tailored to meet the challenge from the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s current strategic posture and military capabilities. Part 4 concludes the series with a discussion of how Australia may overcome the political, strategic and capability obstacles the preceding analysis has identified.

Key takeaways

- Current Australian defence and strategic policy is based on an assessment that the People's Republic of China (PRC) represents both a counter-hegemonic and counter-order challenge. The benchmark by which to measure that policy must be how well it is tailored to meet both the PRC's threats to our direct interests, and to mitigate the potential for Sino-US conflict.
- An analysis of the PRC's current strategic posture and military capabilities demonstrates that it remains focused on a 'local balancing' strategy to deny the ability of the US to intervene in what it considers to be its immediate region.
- This suggests that the capabilities and strategy detailed in the Defence Strategic Review are misaligned to the nature of the most likely threats posed to Australia's interests by the PRC's strategic posture and military capabilities.

Introduction

The April 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR) asserted that Australia faces an external security environment which is ‘now radically different’ from the past.¹ This assessment is based on interlinked judgements about the relative decline of the US, the PRC’s military modernisation, and the PRC’s strategic intent. The DSR stated that not only is the US no longer the ‘unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific’ but that it is engaged in ‘major power competition’ with the PRC which ‘has the potential to threaten our interests, including the potential for conflict’.² The PRC’s military build-up, it continued, ‘without transparency or reassurance to the Indo-Pacific region of China’s strategic intent’ has combined with its ‘assertion of sovereignty’ in the South China Sea to threaten the ‘global rules-based order’ in ‘a way that adversely impacts Australia’s national interests’.³

Australia’s response to this ‘radically different’ security environment, as Parts 1 and 2 of this UTS:ACRI Analysis series have detailed, has been to recentre deterrence as the fulcrum of defence and strategic policy.⁴ The DSR has emphasised the need for Australia to acquire and/or develop military capabilities to hold adversaries (e.g., the PRC) ‘at risk’ at greater distance from Australia. This is deemed necessary not only to protect the Australian continent but to contribute to ‘collective security’ and the maintenance of the ‘rules-based order’ in the Indo-Pacific through deeper cooperation with the US.

This is ultimately the product of an overall strategic assessment that the PRC presents a counter-hegemonic and counter-order challenge as it seeks to weaken American pre-eminence and reshape the existing international order in its favour.⁵ From Australia’s perspective, this fundamentally challenges the basis upon which Australia’s post-1945 security has been built – a stable, ‘rules-based’ order predicated on American primacy – and makes Canberra’s ‘China choice’ to actively bolster American power in the region an understandable one. This assessment has, for example, been expressed by Foreign Minister Penny Wong when she asserted during her April 17 2023 address to the National Press Club that Australia’s statecraft is about ensuring a ‘predictable region’ in which ‘no country dominates, and no country is dominated’.⁶ The best way to ensure this, Wong implied, was through supporting American efforts to maintain the status quo as competition between the US and the PRC ‘is not merely about who is top dog’ but rather ‘about the rules and norms that underpin our security and prosperity, that ensure our access within an open and inclusive region, and that manage competition responsibly’.⁷

However, such a choice brings into sharp relief Australia’s apparent acceptance of the risk of Sino-US conflict in our region.

The benchmark, then, by which to measure contemporary Australian strategic and defence policy must be how well it is tailored to meet both the PRC’s threats to our direct interests, and to mitigate the potential for Sino-US conflict. To assess this, we must examine what the PRC’s strategic posture and military capabilities are. Then we must compare this, first, to the capabilities and strategy of the DSR, and second, to the implicit ‘division of labour’ approach between Australia and the US inherent to the construct of ‘integrated deterrence’. An important – and often overlooked – piece of this puzzle is how the approach to deterrence we have adopted may interact with the PRC’s own conception of deterrence. Doing so reveals that: (1) the

1 Australian Government Department of Defence, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 2023, p. 23 <<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>>.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 Michael Clarke, ‘AUKUS, the Defence Strategic Review and Australia’s quest for deterrence’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 30 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/aukus-defence-strategic-review-and-australia%E2%80%99s-quest-deterrence>>; Michael Clarke, ‘Australia’s post-DSR posture and US ‘integrated deterrence’: A road to nowhere?’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 6 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/australia%E2%80%99s-post-dsr-posture-and-us-%E2%80%98integrated-deterrence%E2%80%99-road-nowhere>>.

5 For the Biden administration’s phrasing of this, see Joseph R. Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021 <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>; Joseph R. Biden, ‘Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Munich Security Conference’, The White House, February 19 2021 <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>>. For an Australian view, see Penny Wong, ‘Australian interests in a regional balance of power’, Address to the National Press Club, April 17 2023 <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-press-club-address-australian-interests-regional-balance-power>>.

6 Penny Wong, ‘Australian interests in a regional balance of power’, Address to the National Press Club, April 17 2023 <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-press-club-address-australian-interests-regional-balance-power>>.

7 *Ibid.*

capabilities and strategy detailed in the DSR are misaligned to the nature of the threats posed to Australia's interests by the PRC's strategic posture and military capabilities; and (2) the implied 'division of labour' under 'integrated deterrence' *increases* rather than decreases the risks of escalation.

The PRC's strategic posture and military capabilities: 'Local balancing' for 'counter-intervention'

A country's 'strategic posture' usually refers to the means and methods by which it uses its military capabilities to pursue its national interests. The 'link between national interests and strategic posture', US defence expert Daniel Goure notes, 'is determined by a nation's strategic objectives'.⁸ What, then, are the PRC's strategic objectives and how do they shape its strategic posture and military capabilities?

The PRC's strategic objectives have been clear for decades. While the objective of achieving the 'great national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' has become indelibly associated with Xi Jinping's leadership, it was in fact Deng Xiaoping's successor, Jiang Zemin, who in 2001 asserted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had not only 'initiated the cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics' but had 'found a correct road to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'.⁹

This statement neatly captured two central operating principles that all PRC leaders have abided by which have shaped the country's strategic objectives: a commitment to the nationalist dream of rebuilding the PRC into a wealthy and powerful state, and the preservation of the CCP's monopoly on political power. Central to the attainment of each of these is the development of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a politically reliable and militarily capable institution. As the PRC's 2015 defence white paper underscored, the PRC could become 'neither safe nor strong' without a strong military nor with one that did not 'unswervingly adhere' to the CCP's 'absolute leadership'.¹⁰ These commitments, as American political scientist Avery Goldstein notes, 'have usually reinforced, rather than conflicted with, the most important international influences on China's grand strategy - changes in China's capabilities relative to other states and other states' reactions to China's international behaviour'.¹¹

The interaction of these factors has crucially shaped what the PRC calls its 'military strategic guidelines' (MSGs). MSGs are a form of 'authoritative guidance' generally 'introduced in internal speeches by China's top party or military leaders, usually at an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission'.¹² MSGs are issued in response to assessments of changes in the international order and their implications for the PRC's external security environment, as well as changing domestic objectives and perceptions of the changing nature of warfare.¹³ As such, they provide answers to four key questions: (1) 'who China will fight (the 'strategic opponent)'; (2) where China will fight (the 'primary strategic direction)'; (3) the characteristics of the wars China will fight (the 'basis of preparations for military struggle)'; and (4) how China will fight these wars ('basic guiding thought for operations').¹⁴

What an analysis of the evolution of the PRC's MSGs reveals is that: (1) despite some recent headline-grabbing commentary, the PLA remains focused on East Asia (including the western Pacific); and (2) significant components of PLA capability modernisation are geared primarily to the objective of deterring potential American intervention in this maritime zone. This amounts to a 'local balancing' strategy in which the PRC largely forgoes the ability to conduct large-scale military operations outside its region in favour of extending a defensive perimeter *within* its region to both gain advantage over neighbours and counter-balance the US.¹⁵

8 Daniel Goure, 'Rethinking the U.S. strategic posture', paper presented to the Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, Lexington Institute, September 10 2008 <<https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/rethinking-the-us-strategic.pdf>>.

9 Jiang Zemin, 'Speech at the meeting celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China', Great Hall of the People, Beijing, July 1 2001 <<http://www.china.org.cn/e-speech/a.htm>>.

10 State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's military strategy', May 2015 <<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/Publications/WhitePapers/4887928.html>>.

11 Avery Goldstein, 'China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, reform, and resistance', *International Security*, 45 (1) (2020), pp. 167-168.

12 M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's changing approach to military strategy: The science of military strategy from 2001 and 2013', in Joe McReynolds (ed.), *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), p. 42.

13 David Finkelstein, 'China's national military strategy: An overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines'', *Asia Policy*, 4 (July 2007), p. 68.

14 M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's 'world-class military' ambitions: Origins and implications', *Washington Quarterly*, 43 (1) (2020), p. 92.

15 See Evan B. Montgomery, 'Contested primacy in the Western Pacific: China's rise and the future of U.S. power projection', *International Security*, 38 (4) (2014), p. 125.

Under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, the story of the PRC's MSGs has been one of iterative change in response to external stimuli. For much of the 1980s, Deng temporarily accepted the bipolar reality of the late Cold War not only because external 'stability' was deemed necessary for the pursuit of domestic reform but also due to the perception that Moscow remained the PRC's primary security threat and rapprochement with Washington was the most effective means of balancing that threat and strengthening the PRC's economic and military potential through access to American markets and technology.¹⁶ The PRC's MSG in this period reflected this with a continued focus on defending the PRC from the Soviet threat along its continental frontiers.¹⁷

A series of events from the late 1980s onward, however, decisively shifted the trajectory of the PRC's MSG. The Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 and the subsequent imposition of international sanctions on the PRC, combined with the First Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, signalled not only the beginning of the 'unipolar moment' of US predominance but also American harnessing of the revolution in military affairs (RMA).¹⁸

The effects of these developments were threefold: first, the Soviet collapse demonstrated the necessity of maintaining firm one-party rule; second, the Gulf War underscored the wide technological gap between the PLA and the US military; and, third, it demonstrated that the nature of warfare had fundamentally shifted from the 'defensive operations based upon attrition warfare and a society mobilised for war'¹⁹ that the PLA had historically been prepared for, to 'the application of masses of manpower and equipment' to 'high-technology local wars'.²⁰ For the PLA to adapt to this latter shift would require it to implement the 'large-scale use of information technology, advanced materials, aerospace systems and other advanced technologies in weapons systems' and undertake integrated 'joint operations' from all branches of the armed forces.²¹

The PRC's MSG of 1993 bore the imprint of these lessons. Beijing assessed that, in the future, the PLA would have to fight 'localised' wars along the PRC's periphery in defence of its vital interests (e.g. Taiwan) against adversaries such as the US that possessed considerable hi-tech capabilities.²² To do so, the PLA would not only have to have advanced capabilities but also would have to shift its traditional heavy reliance on the army toward the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) in order to undertake the 'joint' operations required in this new era of warfare.²³ Significantly, the 'primary strategic direction' – i.e. the core geographic region

16 See, e.g., Lu Sun, 'Deng plays the 'China card': Deng Xiaoping's visit to the United States and its implications for China's new long march to modernization', in Priscilla Roberts (ed.), *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2022), pp. 63–89.

17 M. Taylor Fravel, 'Shifts in warfare and party unity: Explaining China's changes in military strategy', *International Security*, 42 (3) (2018), p. 66–71.

18 The basic premise for the early 1990s debates about RMA was that advances in contemporary technology – such as computing hardware and software, robotics, sensor technologies etc. – would make it possible for militaries to organize, equip and fight in fundamentally new ways that would change the nature of warfare. For a good review of these debates see Michael O'Hanlon, *A Retrospective on the So-Called Revolution in Military Affairs, 2000–2020*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-retrospective-on-the-so-called-revolution-in-military-affairs-2000-2020/>. For the effects of RMA on the First Gulf War, see, for example, Stephen Biddle, 'Victory misunderstood: what the Gulf War tells us about the future of conflict', *International Security*, 21 (2) (1996), pp. 139–179; and for analysis of RMA's effects on Chinese military thinking, see John Arquilla and Solomon M Karmel, 'Welcome to the revolution...in Chinese military affairs', *Defence Analysis*, 13 (3) (1997), pp. 255–269; and Andrew Scobell, David Lai and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2011).

19 See Paul H. B. Godwin, 'Chinese military strategy revised: local and limited war', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 519 (1) (1992), pp. 192–193; and Paul H. B. Godwin, 'The Chinese defence establishment: The hard lessons of incomplete modernization', in Laurie Burkitt, Larry M. Wortzel, and Andrew Scobell (eds.), *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2003), pp. 27–30.

20 Dean Cheng, 'Chinese lessons from the Gulf Wars', in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute: US Army War College, 2011), pp. 159.

21 Dean Cheng, 'Chinese lessons from the Gulf Wars', in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute: U.S. Army War College, 2011), p. 159; Jiang Zemin as Chair of the Central Military Commission stated to that body on January 13 1993 that '[t]he facts of the Gulf War have shown that along with the utilisation of high technology in the military arena, the enhancement of precision attack weapons and unprecedented operational intensity, the characteristics of sudden, three-dimensional, mobile, rapid, and in-depth attacks, have become more prominent'. For the full text of this speech see 'Then Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Jiang Zemin's 1993 speech at Central Military Commission outlines People's Liberation Army's (PLA) military strategy', *MEMRI TV*, May 20 2022 <<https://www.memri.org/reports/then-chinese-communist-party-ccp-leader-jiang-zemins-1993-speech-central-military-commission>>.

22 See Paul H. B. Godwin, 'From continent to periphery: PLA doctrine, strategy and capabilities towards 2000', *China Quarterly*, 146 (1996), pp. 464–487; and Nan Li, 'The PLA's evolving warfighting doctrine, strategy and tactics, 1985–1995: A Chinese perspective', *China Quarterly*, 146 (1996), pp. 443–463.

23 David Finkelstein, 'China's national military strategy: An overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines'', *Asia Policy*, 4 (July) (2007), pp. 110–112.

or theatre of likely conflict – was now deemed to be the PRC’s east coast littoral, with its traditional focus on continental defence implicitly becoming a ‘secondary strategic direction’.²⁴

The challenges posed to the PLA of defending the PRC’s interests in this new era were underlined by its inability to deter American military intervention during its attempted coercion of Taiwan during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96.²⁵ Subsequent conflicts – notably NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 – further reinforced the post-1993 emphasis on addressing the PLA’s technological, capability and doctrinal shortcomings. Kosovo, in particular, was viewed by some PRC observers as the quintessential ‘non-contact, high-technology local war’, whereby the US leveraged its enormous technological superiority to subdue Slobodan Milosevic’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia without recourse to deployment of ground forces.²⁶

The assessment of the impact of RMA on the future of warfare, and its implications for the PLA’s modernisation, first enunciated in 1993, has continued to shape the evolution of the PRC’s strategic posture, military capabilities, and military doctrine into the present.²⁷ Indeed, while the PRC has amended its MSG on several occasions since 1993 (i.e. 2004, 2014 and 2019) these have all constituted variations on the theme of transforming the PLA ‘from an untested, degraded and stove-piped military to a force increasingly capable of conducting joint operations, fighting and winning intensive conflicts against technologically sophisticated foes’.²⁸

These core themes of adapting to the shifting nature of warfare and shifting perceptions of who and where the PLA may be required to fight have been evident in the PRC’s post-1993 MSGs. With respect to the former issue, the 2004, 2014 and 2019 MSGs have all emphasised the need for the continued ‘informatisation’ of the PLA²⁹ where ‘informatisation’ refers to ‘the collection, processing, and individual utilisation of information in all aspects of warfighting in order to seamlessly link platforms in real time from across the services to gain leverage and advantage on the battlefield’.³⁰ The latter (i.e. where the PLA may have to fight), however, saw some adjustment in 2014 with the PRC’s ‘primary strategic direction’ identified as East Asia, including the eastern half of the western Pacific, reflecting a concern that conflict might ‘occur over Taiwan’ and also that it would likely involve the US.³¹

This, unsurprisingly, carried with it an identification of the maritime domain as one of explicit ‘struggle’ for the PLA to ensure PRC interests. This, as academics Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel note, did not signify the elevation of the maritime domain above others but rather its centrality ‘in the key scenarios in which the PRC would use force (especially Taiwan but also maritime conflicts in the East and South China Seas) and in the protection of overseas interests’.³² As such, the PLAN strategy was also ‘altered from focusing only on the “near seas”, or defence of PRC sovereignty interests in East Asia, to gradually combine “near seas defence” with “far seas protection”, or a focus on interests beyond the region’, while its capability development continued to be fixed on achieving ‘blue water’ power projection and bolstering anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) through sustained investment in cruise missiles, short and medium range ballistic missiles, and anti-ship

24 *Ibid*, at pp. 115–116. Jiang Zemin, for example, in his Central Military Commission speech of 1993 affirmed the pre-eminence of Taiwan stating that ‘[t]he military must actively support the Party and government in strengthening its political, economic, cultural, [etc.] attractiveness and influence over Taiwan, giving play to the role of military deterrence, containing ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces, working hard to promote peaceful reunification, while at the same time seriously handling emergency military preparations’. See ‘Then Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Jiang Zemin’s 1993 speech at Central Military Commission outlines People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) military strategy’, MEMRI TV, May 20 2022 <<https://www.memri.org/reports/then-chinese-communist-party-ccp-leader-jiang-zemins-1993-speech-central-military-commission>>.

25 Robert S. Ross, ‘The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait confrontation: coercion, credibility, and the use of force’, *International Security*, 25 (2) (2000), pp. 87–123.

26 See, June Teufel Dreyer, ‘People’s Liberation Army lessons from foreign conflicts: The air war in Kosovo’, in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute: U.S. Army War College, 2011), pp. 33–40; and Jacqueline Newmyer, ‘The revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33 (4) (2010), p. 495.

27 See M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defence: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), Chapters 7 and 8 (pp. 217–269).

28 Bates Gill, Adam Ni and Dennis Blasko, ‘The ambitious reform plans of the People’s Liberation Army: Progress, prospects and implications for Australia’, *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 2 (1) (2020), p. 6.

29 M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defence: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 219.

30 Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s military strategy for a ‘new era’: Some change, more continuity, and tantalising hints’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (March 2022), pp. 7–8. The 2014 MSG also asserted that ‘informatisation’ is ‘not just a condition under which wars will be fought, but the dominant feature or characterisation of war’.

31 M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defence: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 218.

32 Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s military strategy for a ‘new era’: Some change, more continuity, and tantalizing hints’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (March 2022), p. 8.

ballistic missiles.³³ This trajectory – a primary strategic focus on East Asia (including the western Pacific) and capability development geared to ‘counter-intervention’ of outside powers in that sphere – was reiterated and reinforced by the 2019 MSG.³⁴

The PRC’s military capabilities, as detailed in the Pentagon’s latest annual assessment of PLA strategy and capabilities, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, published on October 19 2023, continue to be shaped by this ‘primary strategic focus’. The report notes in this context that the PRC ‘has numerically the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of over 370 ships and submarines, including more than 140 major surface combatants’, comprised of ‘modern multi-role platforms featuring advanced anti-ship, anti-air, and anti-submarine weapons and sensors’ that ‘aligns with the PRC’s growing emphasis on the maritime domain and increasing demands for the PLAN to operate at greater distances from mainland China’.³⁵ This is complemented by the PLA Rocket Force’s (PLARF) deployment of a wide suite of short, medium, intermediate and intercontinental ballistic missiles (see Figure 1) and the expansion of the PRC’s nuclear arsenal, including fielding the JL-3 intercontinental-range submarine-launched ballistic missile on its current JIN-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines.³⁶ In addition, the PRC ‘may be exploring development of conventionally-armed intercontinental range missile systems’ that ‘if developed and fielded... would allow the PRC to threaten conventional strikes against targets in the continental United States, Hawaii, and Alaska’.³⁷ Chinese analysts, MIT Asian security studies expert Eric Heginbotham notes, believe that such missile capabilities are ‘a particular area of Chinese strength’ that provide it with ‘advantages in areas immediately surrounding China’.³⁸

Taken together, these capabilities, the Pentagon report assesses, ‘strengthen the PRC’s ability to “fight and win wars” against a “strong enemy” (a likely euphemism for the United States), counter an intervention by a third party in a conflict along the PRC’s periphery, and project power globally’.³⁹

Deterrence with Chinese characteristics

The PRC’s sustained efforts at force modernisation have unsurprisingly generated much attention on the PLA’s technological capabilities. But, as respected PLA analyst Dennis Blasko notes, the ‘deterrence effects of the same developments’ have not been explored with ‘equal enthusiasm’.⁴⁰ Indeed, often left unstated in public commentary is how the PLA’s capabilities are animated by a particular conception of deterrence that ‘embodies both dissuasion and coercion’.⁴¹ Authoritative documents such as the *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS) compendiums, published biennially by the PRC’s Academy of Military Sciences, illustrate this linkage in PRC thinking; the most recent SMS, in 2020, asserted that deterrence has two functions: ‘to stop the other party from doing what they want to do through deterrence’ (i.e. dissuasion), and ‘to use deterrence to coerce the other party to do what they must do’ (i.e. compellence).⁴²

33 *Ibid*, at p. 9; for tracking of A2/AD capabilities around the time of China’s 2014 MSG, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, 2013, pp. 30-35; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, 2015, pp. 30-33.

34 For a thorough comparison of the 2014 and 2019 MSGs see Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s military strategy for a ‘new era’: Some change, more continuity, and tantalizing hints’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (March 2022).

35 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, October 2023, pp. 52-53, <<https://media.defence.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>>.

36 *Ibid*, at pp. 103-106. For further analysis of the expansion of China’s nuclear arsenal see Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda and Eliana Reynolds, ‘Chinese nuclear weapons, 2023’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 79 (2) (2023), pp. 108-133.

37 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, October 2023, p. 66.

38 Eric Heginbotham, *Chinese Views of the Military Balance in the Western Pacific*, CMSI China Maritime Report No. 14, China Maritime Studies Institute, June 2021, pp. 9-10 <<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>>.

39 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, October 2023, p. 47.

40 Dennis Blasko, ‘China’s evolving approach to strategic deterrence,’ in Joe McReynolds (ed.), *China’s Evolving Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2017), pp. 335-356.

41 Dean Cheng, *Evolving Chinese Thinking about Deterrence: The Nuclear Dimension*, Heritage Foundation, August 16 2017 <<https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/evolving-chinese-thinking-about-deterrence-the-nuclear-dimension>>.

42 Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), p 131; for the classic distinction between the two concepts in western scholarship see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

Figure 1. Ranges of PLA's fielded conventional strike



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress, United States Department of Defense, October 19 2023, p. 69.

PRC understandings of the concept also frame it explicitly as an *instrument* rather than as an objective of policy. The focus is not 'deterrence action in one or another domain, but in securing the larger Chinese strategic objective', such as preventing Taiwan from declaring independence or obtaining acquiescence for PRC claims to the South China Sea.⁴³

Therefore, for the PRC, deterrence is conceived of not as a static activity, but one that has phases of application across peacetime, crisis and war. The 2013 SMS, for example, details that during peacetime the objective is to employ 'a normalised deterrence posture to force an opponent to not dare to act lightly or rashly' based on 'low-intensity military activities', such as holding military exercises, 'displaying advanced weapons' and diplomatically asserting the PRC's 'strategic bottom line'.⁴⁴ This is suggestive of the notion of 'general deterrence' where 'arms and warnings are a contribution to the broad context of international politics' in which the core objective 'is to manage the context so that for an opponent it will appear basically unattractive to resort to force'.⁴⁵ In crisis situations, in turn, the PLA will adopt 'a high-intensity deterrence posture, to show a *strong resolve of willingness* to fight and powerful actual strength, to force an opponent to promptly reverse course'.⁴⁶

War control has been equated with notions of escalation management or control.⁴⁷ Yet another possibility is suggested by analysis of the treatment of this term in the 2013 SMS and 2020 SMS documents. One view is

43 Dean Cheng, 'An overview of Chinese thinking about deterrence', in Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (eds), *Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice* (The Hague: NL ARMS TMC Asser Press, December 4 2020), p.179 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8-10>>. The 2020 SMS underlines this by noting that deterrence is a 'method of military conflict to achieve a political goal based on military strength, a comprehensive use of various means, through clever display of strength and determination to use strength, makes the other party face unworthy or even unbearable consequences, and is forced to give in, compromise, or surrender'. See Xiao Tianling (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), p. 126.

44 Shou Xiaosong (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2013), p. 119.

45 Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), p. 43.

46 Shou Xiaosong (ed), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2013), p. 119. Author's emphasis.

47 See, e.g., Lonnie D. Henley, 'War control: Chinese concepts of escalation management', in Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel (eds.), *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006), pp. 81–109; and Alison A Kaufman and Daniel M Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control*, Centre for Naval Analyses, February 2016 <<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1005033>>.

that war control is to be ‘used within the opportunity between total war and total peace. The *outbreak of war is a condition which makes war control possible*. Preventing war is not among its imperatives’.⁴⁸ As such, it is a warfighting concept.

The 2013 SMS provided a snapshot of the essence of ‘war control’ when it noted that it means: ‘grasping the war’s initiative, to be able to adjust and control the war goals, means, scales, tempos, time opportunities and scope, and to strive to obtain a favourable war conclusion, at a relatively small price’.⁴⁹ By picking ‘the timing for the start of the war’ and surprising the enemy by attacking ‘where they are least prepared’, the PRC can ‘seize the battlefield initiative, paralyze the enemy’s war command, and give shock to the enemy’s will’ and thus ‘achieve victory even before the fighting starts’.⁵⁰

The 2020 SMS chapter on ‘war control’ provides further detail by identifying three necessary stages for its successful employment: the ‘control of war techniques’ (i.e. deliberate control of escalation through grey zone–conventional–nuclear capabilities); control of the pace, rhythm and intensity of conflict (i.e. centrality of shifting from defensive to offensive operations at the outbreak of conflict); and control of or the ability to ‘proactively end the war’ (i.e. an ‘escalate to de-escalate’ approach).⁵¹

This suggests three implications.

First, the focus on ‘war control’ is informed by the PRC’s historical conflict behavior, where Beijing has had a ‘heavy preference for escalation over de-escalation to bring a conflict to an end’.⁵² This ‘escalate to de-escalate’ approach ‘in the early stages of conflict’, as American political scientist Oriana Skylar Mastro notes, is seen as having strengthened the PRC’s capacity to prevent ‘the outbreak of total war’ during the Korean War, the Sino-Indian border war and the Sino-Vietnamese War.⁵³

Second, the delineation of ‘war control’ into distinct phases suggests it ‘is intended to ensure flexibility in military options so the Chinese Communist Party can realise its political ambitions and affect its desired policy without compromise’ and that PRC strategists believe that warfighting intensity can be *precisely* controlled.⁵⁴

Third, conventional capabilities are now perceived as major instruments for attaining such controllability. The 2020 SMS explicitly notes that ‘the development of high-tech conventional weapons’ has not only ‘narrowed the gap’ between their ‘combat effectiveness’ and that of nuclear weapons, but that hi-tech conventional capabilities have ‘higher accuracy and greater controllability’.⁵⁵ As such, conventional deterrence ‘is highly controllable and less risky, and generally does not lead to devastating disasters like nuclear war. It is convenient to achieve political goals and becomes a credible deterrence method’.⁵⁶

This holds implications for understanding future PRC behaviour in crisis and conflict scenarios. The PRC’s evolving strategy toward Taiwan, in particular, is consistent with the dual meaning of deterrence as encompassing both dissuasion and compellence in authoritative PRC military writings. This can be seen in the dual nature of PRC strategy, as it seeks to dissuade Washington from intervening should the PRC choose to use force across the Taiwan Strait and simultaneously compel Taipei to accept its concept and model of ‘reunification’.

To achieve the first objective (i.e., to dissuade Washington), and consistent with its ‘local balancing’ strategy, the PRC has sought to decisively shift the military balance between it and Taiwan, while developing capabilities to delay or deny the US military access to the island and its surrounds in the event of conflict. With respect to the second objective (i.e., to compel Taiwan), it has sought to integrate a variety of diplomatic,

48 Howard Wang, ‘The ideal tool of nations: war control in Chinese military thought’, *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 7 (1) (2019), p. 9. Emphasis added.

49 Shou Xiaosong (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2013), pp. 115–116.

50 *Ibid.*, at pp. 115–116.

51 Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), pp. 254–257.

52 Oriana Skylar Mastro, ‘The theory and practice of war termination: Assessing patterns in China’s historical behavior’, *International Studies Review*, 20 (4) (2018), p. 678.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Howard Wang, ‘The ideal tool of nations: War control in Chinese military thought’, *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 7 (1) (January 2019), p.10.

55 Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), p. 129.

56 *Ibid.*

economic and military instruments⁵⁷ to prevent Taipei from any deviation from Beijing's interpretation of the 'One China policy'.⁵⁸

In August 2022, this was expressed through Beijing's imposition of a variety of economic and diplomatic sanctions, backed by military exercises that directly impinged upon Taiwan's territorial waters, exclusive economic zone and air defence identification zone.⁵⁹ For example, the exercises conducted off the PRC's Pingtan Island, at the narrowest point of the Taiwan Strait, and in the Bashi Channel, which separates waters within the First Island Chain from the Philippines Sea and the broader Pacific Ocean, demonstrated the PRC's capability to control these vital chokepoints in a potential quarantine or blockade of Taiwan.⁶⁰ That these activities were designed to signal the PRC's capability to impose such punishment was underlined by an analyst from the Naval Research Academy of the PLA, who asserted that this element of the exercises constituted a 'closed encirclement posture towards Taiwan Island' where the PLA could force 'a situation of closing the door and hitting dogs' in the event of conflict – a colourful turn of phrase that implies the PLA could effectively delay and/or deny US forces access to Taiwan.⁶¹

RAND analyst Mark Cozad noted in 2021 that the PRC's A2/AD capabilities – such as the DF-15 and DF-16 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), the anti-ship DF-21D medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) and DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) deployed by the PLARF brigades tasked with Taiwan contingencies⁶² – provided it with 'numerous options to hold at risk major US bases, logistics hubs and command and control facilities throughout the region'.⁶³ Significantly, during the August 2022 exercises, the PRC's missile launches likely involved the DF-15 variant, which is designed for 'precision strike, bunker-busting and anti-runway operations'.⁶⁴ Other elements of the PLA's exercises consistent with an A2/D2 approach vis-a-vis US forces were the inclusion of air and sea-based anti-submarine capabilities, such as the Y-8 surveillance/anti-submarine warfare aircraft and regular sorties of the PLAAF J-11 and J-16 fighters (aircraft

57 For China's economic coercion in cross-strait relations see Christina Lai, 'More than carrots and sticks: economic statecraft and coercion in China-Taiwan relations from 2000 to 2019', *Politics*, 42 (3) (2022), pp. 410–425.

58 For Beijing's official position see State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'White Paper – the One-China principle and the Taiwan issue', February 21 2000, published by the Taiwan Documents Project, source: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America <<http://www.taiwandocuments.org/white.htm>>. For a discussion on the many interpretations of the 'One China policy' see Jessica Drun, 'One China, multiple interpretations', Centre for Advanced China Research, December 28 2017 <<https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2017/12/29/One-China-Multiple-Interpretations>>.

59 See Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Matthew P. Funaiolo, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, Nicholas Kaufman, 'Tracking the fourth Taiwan Strait crisis', China Power Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 23 2022 <<https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/>>; and Betty Hou and Sampson Ellis, 'Taiwan says China economic ties make more sanctions unlikely', *Bloomberg*, August 8 2022 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-08/taiwan-says-economic-ties-to-china-make-more-sanctions-unlikely>>.

60 See Bradley Martin, Kristen Gunness, Paul DeLuca and Melissa Shostak, *Implications of a Coercive Quarantine of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China*, RAND Corporation, 2022 <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1279-1.html>; and Chris Buckley, Pablo Robles, Marco Hernandez and Amy Chang Chien, 'How China could choke Taiwan', *New York Times*, August 25 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/25/world/asia/china-taiwan-conflict-blockade.html>>.

61 Wei Qi and Guo Yuanda, 'Jingwai meiti jiedu Jiefangjun liu da yanxiu: Duoge Tai junjidi shou dang qi chong' 境外媒体解读解放军六大演习区: 多个台军基地首当其冲 (Foreign media interpret the six major exercise areas of the People's Liberation Army: a number of Taiwan military bases bear the brunt), *Huangqiu*, August 4 2022 <<https://m.huanqiu.com/article/49670mSpWp8>>; The Taiwanese commentator, Chen Kuohsiang assessed the exercises in a similar fashion, suggesting it amounted to 'an attack simulation' that demonstrated China would claim 'sovereignty over Taiwan by locking down the island', depriving Taiwan of 'its strategic manoeuvring space' and restricting the 'US's support from the east' in the event of conflict. See Chen Kuohsiang, 'Taiwan Strait war will destroy peace and trade in the Asia-Pacific region', *ThinkChina*, August 18 2022 <<https://www.thinkchina.sg/taiwan-strait-war-will-destroy-peace-and-trade-asia-pacific-region>>.

62 For PLARF Taiwan-relevant deployments of SRBMs and MRBMs see, Yuan-Chou Jing and Yi-Ren Lai, 'Evolving missions and capabilities of the PLA Rocket Force: Implications for Taiwan and beyond', *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, November 19 2021 <<https://jamestown.org/program/evolving-missions-and-capabilities-of-the-pla-rocket-force-implications-for-taiwan-and-beyond/>>.

63 Mark Cozad, 'Factors shaping China's use of force calculations against Taiwan', Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission: Hearing on deterring the People's Republic of China aggression toward Taiwan, 117th Congress, 1st session, February 18 2021 <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Mark_Cozad_Testimony.pdf>.

64 See David Chen, 'Learning from the first phase of the fourth Taiwan Strait crisis', *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, August 12 2022 <<https://jamestown.org/program/learning-from-the-first-phase-of-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/>>; Republic of China Ministry of National Defence, 'Guofangbu fabu xinwengao, shengming 'Zhonggong xiang Taiwan Dongbebu ji Xinanbu zhoubian haiyu, fashe duozhi Dongfeng xilie dandaodan' yiqing' 國防部發布新聞稿, 說明「中共向臺灣東北部及西南部周邊海域, 發射多枚東風系列彈道飛彈」乙情 (Ministry of National Defence releases a press statement, explains the incident in which 'The PRC fired several Dongfeng ballistic missiles into the sea near Taiwan's Northeast and Southwest'), press release, August 4 2022 <<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?SelectStyle=%E6%96%B0%E8%81%9E%E7%A8%BF&p=80172&title=%E5%9C%8B%E9%98%B2%E6%B6%88%E6%81%AF>>. For specifications of the PRC's ballistic missile inventory see, Missile Defence Project, 'Missiles of China', *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14 2018, last modified April 12 2021 <<https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/china/>>.

thought to be capable of carrying the PL-15 air-to-air missile, which is optimised to target aerial refueling and airborne early warning control aircraft across the ‘median line’ of the Taiwan Strait).⁶⁵

The DSR and the PRC’s military posture: Correct diagnosis but no cure?

The PRC’s military posture and capabilities are thus geared to increasing the costs of power projection by another power into its immediate region. Yet, as Evan Braden Montgomery of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments has noted, this is problematic for the broader region since even ‘if the PRC’s chief goal is not for China to become a peer competitor of the United States but rather to gain a coercive advantage over neighbors such as Taiwan and Japan, it *cannot succeed* without undermining the United States’ ability to come to their defense’.⁶⁶

This is acknowledged by the Pentagon, with its October 2023 report on PRC military strategy and capabilities stating bluntly that the ‘PRC’s counter-intervention strategy aims to restrict the United States from having a presence in the East and South China Sea regions - within the FIC [first island chain] - and increasingly to hold at risk US access in the broader Indo-Pacific region’.⁶⁷ This suggests that, as one of the world’s leading experts on the PLA, M. Taylor Fravel, argues, ‘military competition between the United States and China will likely create a contested zone in maritime East Asia into which both sides can project power but neither may be able to dominate’.⁶⁸

For Australia, then, the question is how do the strategy and capabilities committed to under the DSR mitigate the risks of such contestation escalating to conflict?

As Part 1 of this series noted, the strategic posture advocated by the DSR is a hybrid one. The core missions that it tasks the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with combines elements of a classic ‘Defence of Australia’ (DoA) approach focused on deterring potential adversaries’ abilities to project power into our northern approaches, with elements reminiscent of the era of ‘forward defence’ which rested on the assumption that the prospects for Australian security would be determined at the global level.

This hybridity embeds an inherent tension long evident in Australian strategic thinking into future defence policy. As the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s Rod Lyon neatly summarises, this ‘pits those who believe Australia should concentrate on fighting off existential threats close to home - “border wars” - against those who would be prepared to fight for grander goals in more distant theatres - “order wars”’.⁶⁹ The DSR, as Part 1 of this series also detailed, attempts to balance this division in capability terms through a focus on a range of missile systems aligned to the area-denial requirements of the deterrence-by-denial posture in Australia’s northern approaches, with the future capability of the nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) envisaged under AUKUS to contribute to ‘order maintenance’ missions in farther flung theatres. The core question that this hybrid approach poses for Australia is clear: ‘Are we trying to deter China close to Australia or close to China?’.⁷⁰

The preceding analysis of the evolution of the PRC’s military posture and capabilities would tend to suggest that seeking to deter closer to the PRC would, on balance, be the more rational objective.

This is due to two major factors. The first concerns the major implication of the PRC’s strategic posture. Its ‘local balancing’ strategy of seeking advantage over neighbours and ‘counterbalancing a distant hegemon’

65 Ryan Morgan, ‘China sends 13 warships, record 68 warplanes inside Taiwan’s Defence zone’, *American Military News*, August 5 2022 <<https://americanmilitarynews.com/2022/08/china-sends-13-warships-record-68-warplanes-inside-taiwans-Defence-zone/>>; and Jack Lau, ‘Beijing carries out anti-submarine, sea assault drills around Taiwan’, *South China Morning Post*, August 8 2022 <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3188115/beijing-continues-unprecedented-drills-around-taiwan>>.

66 Evan B. Montgomery, ‘Contested primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s rise and the future of U.S. power projection’, *International Security*, 38 (4) (2014), p. 125. My emphasis.

67 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, October 19 2023, p. vii.

68 M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s ‘world-class military’ ambitions: Origins and implications’, *Washington Quarterly*, 43 (1) (2020), p. 95.

69 *Ibid.*

70 Marcus Hellyer, ‘Do we have a viable military strategy?’, *The Australian*, May 25 2023 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/special-reports/do-we-have-a-viable-military-strategy/news-story/82caa9474afe75e58617e20036ee3d70>>.

(i.e. the US) are, as Evan Braden Montgomery notes, ‘overlapping objectives that require similar capabilities’.⁷¹ Beijing’s progress toward either objective therefore holds the potential to produce challenges to both regional and global order that are contrary to Australia’s security and interests.

The second factor stems from the assessment of Australia’s strategic environment and the missions tasked to the ADF in the DSR. As noted in Part 1 of this series,⁷² the DSR explicitly states that although ‘at present’ there is ‘only a remote possibility of any power contemplating an invasion of our continent’, the ‘proliferation of long-range precision strike weapons has radically reduced Australia’s geographic benefits, the comfort of distance and our qualitative regional capability edge’.⁷³ The first part of the DSR assessment raises the question of whether a number of the major capability acquisitions committed to – such as substantial investments in land-based systems such as Precision Strike Missiles (PrSMs; range 400km) and Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs; range 300km) for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) – are warranted given the nature of the threat the DSR perceives from the PRC.⁷⁴ Indeed, as detailed above, the PRC remains focused on its ‘local balancing’ strategy for ‘counter-intervention’ far from Australian shores and it will remain so as long as the Taiwan issue remains unresolved.

The second part of the DSR assessment clearly informs the judgement that the ‘ADF must be able to hold an adversary at risk further from our shores’.⁷⁵ Yet, as detailed in Parts 1 and 2 of this series,⁷⁶ the capability that will provide Australia with this ability – the future SSNs – are bedeviled by a fundamental misalignment between the operational benefits of the capability and the stated strategy of deterrence (deterrence by denial) that will animate their use. Indeed, while SSNs are more suited to deterrence-by-punishment missions, the adoption of such an approach by Australian conventionally-armed SSNs would appear neither prudent nor credible given that in the most likely theatres in which Australia may deploy such a capability (e.g. South China Sea or Taiwan), geographic proximity and PRC A2/AD capabilities⁷⁷ mean that a punishment strategy would have to undertake strikes on the PRC mainland to be credible.⁷⁸

In addition to these issues, we must also factor in how the deterrent posture and capabilities that we adopt may interact with those of our potential adversary (i.e. the PRC). What role, for instance, could Australia’s future SSNs play in the type of Taiwan blockade scenario undertaken by the PRC during its August 2022 exercises and what responses could we expect from Beijing? As noted in Part 2 of this series,⁷⁹ Australian analyst Paul Dibb posits two possible roles for Australia’s SSNs. First, ‘our Virginia-class SSNs will be able to use 2000-kilometre-range anti-ship missiles to strike China’s forces in the Taiwan Strait’ from the ‘safety of

71 Evan B. Montgomery, ‘Contested primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s rise and the future of U.S. power projection’, *International Security*, 38 (4) (2014), p. 125.

72 Michael Clarke, ‘AUKUS, the Defence Strategic Review and Australia’s quest for deterrence’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 30 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/aukus-defence-strategic-review-and-australia%E2%80%99s-quest-deterrence>>.

73 Australian Government Department of Defence, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 2023, p. 25 <<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>>.

74 Moreover, one could also question how such commitments address the nature of the challenge we perceive from the PRC close to our shores in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands. Here it is clear that the challenges – whether from the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), PRC economic coercion or policing agreements with regional governments – cannot be dealt with through military instruments. See, e.g., Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo, ‘China seeks more island security pacts to boost clout in Pacific’, *Financial Times*, May 21 2022 <<https://www.ft.com/content/e2116b29-e58b-4fa0-8003-d28d18ddf06f>>; Joanne Wallis and Maima Koro, ‘Amplifying narratives about the ‘China threat’ in the Pacific may help China achieve its broader aims’, *The Conversation*, May 27 2022 <<https://theconversation.com/amplifying-narratives-about-the-china-threat-in-the-pacific-may-help-china-achieve-its-broader-aims-183917>>; and Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant and Jonathan Pryke, ‘Ocean of debt? Belt and Road and debt diplomacy in the Pacific’, Lowy Institute, October 21 2019 <<https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/ocean-debt-belt-road-debt-diplomacy-pacific>>.

75 *Ibid.*, at p. 6.

76 Michael Clarke, ‘AUKUS, the Defence Strategic Review and Australia’s quest for deterrence’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 30 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/aukus-defence-strategic-review-and-australia%E2%80%99s-quest-deterrence>>; Michael Clarke, ‘Australia’s post-DSR posture and US ‘integrated deterrence’: A road to nowhere?’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 6 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/australia%E2%80%99s-post-dsr-posture-and-us-%E2%80%98integrated-deterrence%E2%80%99-road-nowhere>>.

77 The Pentagon’s latest assessment states that China’s A2/AD capabilities are ‘the most robust within the FIC [first island chain]’. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*, United States Department of Defense, October 19 2023, p. 88 <<https://media.defence.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>>.

78 Michael Petersen, ‘The perils of conventional deterrence by punishment’, *War on the Rocks*, November 11 2016 <<https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-perils-of-conventional-deterrence-by-punishment/>>.

79 Michael Clarke, ‘Australia’s post-DSR posture and US ‘integrated deterrence’: A road to nowhere?’, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 6 2023 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/australia%E2%80%99s-post-dsr-posture-and-us-%E2%80%98integrated-deterrence%E2%80%99-road-nowhere>>.

deepwater trenches east of the Philippines without detection’, and second, the SSNs could ‘deny the narrow straits of Southeast Asia to China’s overseas trade’.⁸⁰ Dibb argues that this would constitute ‘an important, independent military role for Australia, but without the potentially high cost of losing our relatively small number of military assets in a direct war over Taiwan’.

Yet there are several problematic assumptions here.

First, the PRC’s own deterrence posture – which as we have seen emphasises the concept of ‘war control’ and an apparent belief in the utility of conventional escalation – arguably increases the risks for Australia should our SSNs undertake missions/deployments as envisaged by Dibb. Second, the assumption that Australian SSNs will remain undetected downplays the possibility of significant advances in quantum sensing technology in the time between now and the late 2030s when Australia may be expected to have an operational SSN capability.⁸¹ Third, given that Australia would likely only have one or two deployable SSNs (due to the ‘rule of three’), one may also question whether that would be sufficient to undertake the missions described by Dibb.⁸² Fourth, and relatedly, as Australia would undertake such a deployment under the rubric of ‘collective deterrence’/‘integrated deterrence’, how ‘independent’ would such a military role be? Under such a scenario, integration with US warfighting would appear to be a necessity for Australian SSNs to make a significant operational contribution, thus suggesting some level of diminution of sovereign decision-making.

A final question that hovers over the future role of Australia’s SSNs is that the DSR, as Part 1 of this series detailed, appears to prioritise, in both capability and strategy terms, the littoral defence of Australia. SSNs, however, are not necessary for such a task.⁸³ What we are left with after the DSR, therefore, is an entrenched contradiction between the stated objectives of Australian defence policy – encompassing the simultaneous pursuit of classic DoA and ‘forward defence’ objectives – and the strategy and capabilities tasked with achieving them.

Conclusion

What, then, can be done to square the circle between the fundamental misalignment between objectives, strategy and capabilities that characterises current Australian strategic and defence policy?

The stakes for Australia in answering this question could not be higher. The respected American Sinologist Lowell Dittmer predicted in 2012 that the limit of Australia’s then posture of ‘hedging’ against the PRC’s translation of its economic weight into military and strategic heft, through deepening Australia’s security alliance with the US, would be reached when two conditions were met: when the PRC ‘becomes a genuine threat to one’s own vital interests’, and when the PRC ‘fights one of the alliance members, particularly its leader, the US’.⁸⁴ It is now clear that there is a bipartisan consensus in Canberra that the first condition has been met, while AUKUS and the DSR (and associated capability commitments), combined with the trajectory of the Biden administration’s strategic and defence posture, indicates that both Canberra and Washington believe that the second condition may now loom closer in the near future.

Given this trajectory, Part 4 of this UTS:ACRI Analysis series will assess how the strategy and capabilities that Australia has committed to may perform in a number of short-to-medium term scenarios for Sino-US competition and/or conflict, with a focus on exploring the capability requirements, alliance posture and regional relationships required for success in each. This will provide some insight into how the current contradictions in strategic and defence policy can be mediated.

80 Paul Dibb, ‘Would China dare launch a nuclear war on Australia?’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 9 2023 <<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/will-china-target-australia-and-how-would-australia-respond/>>.

81 See Congressional Research Service, ‘Defence primer: Quantum technology’, October 25 2023 <<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11836>>; and Johannes Peters, ‘Below the surface: Undersea warfare challenges in the 21st century’, in Julian Sawak and Johannes Peters (eds.), *From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea: Allied Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), pp. 100–107.

82 See Hugh White, ‘The AUKUS submarines will never happen’, *The Saturday Paper*, March 15 2023 <<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/world/2023/03/15/the-aukus-submarines-will-never-happen>>; and Hugh White, *How to Defend Australia* (Carlton: Black Inc, 2021), pp. 186–187.

83 Hugh White, ‘SSN vs SSK’, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, September 29 2021 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/ssn-vs-ssk>>.

84 Lowell Dittmer, ‘Sino–Australian relations: a triangular perspective’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 47 (4) (2012), p. 671.

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