

High Intensity Operations and Sustaining Self-Reliance

Sir William Foundation - 11 April 2019

0900- 0925

Defence self-reliance in Australian foreign policy: why and so what?

Like most Australians, I love my sport. Cricket, Rugby, Basketball, you name it I'll watch it. I expect many in this room are the same. I think part of the fascination is that sport, like strategy is fundamentally about competition.

Your own talents, resources and organisation will only take you so far if you are not focused on how to deal with the real adversary in front of you. As fans, we get to watch teams attempt game plans, adjust, find and exploit weaknesses and dig in and fight right before us.

Athletes however, have two big advantages over those of us in the strategy business.

First, they know when their game begins. We often don't.

It is clear that the People's Republic of China fired a starter's pistol for regional strategic competition in 2008. We did not hear it. We have been playing catch up ever since.

Too much can be made of this. Initial deficits are not unusual in the world of sport or strategy, but here is the Athletes' second great advantage: The half-time break.

Along with time for some oranges and a fresh shirt, comes the chance to take stock of just how the game is being played and what you have done right and wrong. So, today, a decade or so into our multi-decade long regional competition, I think it appropriate we take a breather and think through our position.

To borrow a well-word phrase you'll hear from every footy coach, to dig ourselves out of our current hole, I believe we need to get back to the fundamentals. Not only in what we are doing, but where.

Take the issue of 'Grey Zone conflict'. Western discussion of this issue has been both reactive and largely tactical in focus. Yet this issue is not actually about the means employed. China's use of quasi-military, quasi-civilian shipping vessels to push and push below the bar of escalation is simply a tactical choice that exploits a more important strategic choice that

we in the West have made. The heart of the Grey Zone issue is not escalation but national interests.

As part of the West's victory lap after the Cold War, we declared an interest in global peace and prosperity. We claimed an interest in operating virtually anywhere on the globe, no matter who it antagonised or how remote from our own nations.

What is happening today in Eastern Europe by Russia or the South China Sea by China is that the new authoritarians are challenging this claim to near-limitless interests. What they are doing is declaring their judgement that these regions do not seriously matter for the West. And they are right.

Grey Zone conflict is impossible in areas where states have genuine interests and will fight for them. If these regions did matter to the defenders they would respond as all do when their fundamental interests are threatened – with clear demonstrations of force. In such a case, it would be the aggressor, whose quasi-military resources would seem absurd. But in this case, it is the defender who is made to look absurd, claiming an interest they won't actually defend.

The reason Grey Zone conflict works has little to do with the tactics or questions of escalation. Rather, it works because these regions are not core

interests to western powers like the US and Australia and our adversaries know it. We have claimed more of the field than we can possibly cover, and after modest pushing by the new authoritarian states this has been revealed.

A return to fundamentals must therefore begin with thinking afresh about what truly matters to us in the West. To do otherwise and continue our post-cold war indulgence of pretending to care about everything and wanting to control everyone, will lead events and adversaries to prick our hubristic claims one by one.

To return to my sporting metaphor, our game plan of the last thirty years is no longer working. We can either give it '110%' and hope that's enough, as US President Obama's Pivot or Rebalance policy attempted to do, or we can develop a new plan.

One that is founded upon protecting that which is most important to us, that plays to our strengths and which will allow us to re-set the momentum in the game. One that re-connects our interests and available resources, instead of the last decade or two of 'strategic wandering' we have had.

It is in this context, that I want to talk about Australia and Defence Self-Reliance.

Achieving reliance is not be simply a question of logistics, doctrine and resources — though I'm sure everyone in this room would agree with me on the importance of these issues and the need to spend far more on Defence. It is also fundamentally about our ideas and willingness to think for ourselves.

If Self-Reliance is to be meaningful, the first issue has to be the extent to which Australia can provide the ultimate defence of its territory. This is a conversation too often waved away by commentators. Too big, or too expensive they say. Or perhaps its importance is acknowledged but placed behind the many other pressing challenges that require our focus. But there are both strategic and political reasons we need to make the continent a greater focus.

The first and most obvious one, is that our continent is no longer secure. This is the big change for Australia from the Post-Cold War years. Though the likelihood of direct attack is very low, it can't be entirely dismissed. As such, we need a sense of how we could and would respond. Even putting scenarios of invasion aside, there is a possibility of serious strategic pressure being applied against us. Already it is possible for China to apply overflight and harassment efforts to parts of our continent as they do to Japan, Taiwan and South Korea on a regular basis.

Then there are our alliance commitments which I argue should also drive more of a continental focus. Everyone knows ANZUS's famous Article 4, where the parties declare they will 'act to meet the common danger'. What is far less known is Article 2. To quote:

'In order more effectively to achieve the objective of this Treaty the Parties separately and jointly by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.'

Without the ability to resist armed attack individually, we are in breach of ANZUS. This is not just about the technicalities of the treaty. America under its current and previous President has demonstrated strong concerns about burden sharing and allies pulling their weight. Their views reflect an American public which feels taken for granted. One that has sacrificed there, so we may be safe here.

Equally, there is a need in this new Asia to think about how best to use the continent to the mutual aid of ourselves and our allies. For most of the history of the alliance, the continent was the place we departed from. In the future, it may be the place we begin at. The foundation of a different kind of US presence in Asia, and a staging point for high-intensity operations.

Finally, there is a domestic reason to re-focus on continental security.

Though the Australian public remain supportive of the US alliance, the impact of President Trump is sapping support. Demonstrating that the alliance is foremost a means of protecting people's homes is a way to re-assure and strengthen the foundations of ANZUS, our defence posture and our call on taxpayer resources.

We therefore have strategic, legal and political reasons to re-orient our attention at this point to thinking about the security of the continent.

This is not to suggest an isolationist or inward-looking turn. Far from it.

Nor is it about returning to the 1980s Defence of Australia concepts, as I'll cover in a minute.

Rather, it is a position which takes seriously the idea that we may be early into a half-century or more of strategic competition. This means knowing what we will fight to protect and how we can do so. And then being able to go forward from a secure continent. That is what a return to fundamentals means.

To do otherwise, to keep focusing on what we can do at the furthest limits from our core interests, attempting merely to hold firm to the status quo is to risk our own version of a grey zone style crisis. A world where we are

making commitments to our allies abroad that we can't be sure future government's and the Australian public will want to keep. Nor does this extended approach make sense in the face of our specific adversary on the field today. A strategy of simply trying to give '110%', year in and year out, by tired and debt-ridden Western nations, finding ourselves always on the defence against a better resourced and fresher People's Republic of China is not a winning approach.

So what are the fundamentals of continental security for Australia?

Unfortunately, this is a question we will need to think through afresh, rather than hoping that past generations have done the work for us. The Defence of Australia policy, which was in place from roughly 1972 to 1997 took shape in a very different world, politically and technologically. This was an era where our continent was secure – something that is not obviously true today.

We therefore cannot simply adopt and replace DOA's approach to our modern-day challenges. But, by taking a broader sweep of our national history, including the DOA years, we can identify some common challenges and questions this continent poses to those who would defend it.

What is quickly apparent, is that defending Australia requires confronting several paradoxes. How we answer these paradoxes is a reflection of who we think we are as a people and directly shapes the specific defence policies, doctrines and capability choices we make.

Some of the paradoxes are well known and don't need too much elaboration. Australia is both a continent and an island. How we answer this tension informs our funding of the ADF, and whether to seek to defend the northern 'air-sea gap' or to try and use our defence in depth afforded by this vast continental geography.

Other paradoxes we face are the tension between our adversaries largely operating to our North and North West, while our population and resources reside here in the South and South East. Another is that we are a nation often anxious about security and yet extremely frugal when it comes to trying to alleviate that insecurity. There are several more, and I'm trying to work through them at the moment for a book to be published later next year. So comments and suggestions are very welcome.

Today given our theme about self-reliance and sovereignty, I want to discuss a curious paradox related to the role of alliances. Namely that

Australia's greatest security and greatest threat depend on how valuable it is to our allies.

All too often, we think of the significance and security of the Australian continent in terms of the Australians who live upon it.

Those who downplay the threat of China for instance, like to point out that there is no automatic need for a dispute between the Chinese and Australian people. Indeed, our economies are very complementary.

But that is too narrow a viewpoint.

In a maritime and archipelagic region, the Australian continent is a vast prize. One full of potential for the great powers and long desired.

During the 17th and 18th century, European colonial powers looked for a Great Southern Land as a base upon which to sustain and support their Asian trading empires.

For all that Australians revel in our convict origins, it was a strategic purpose that led to White Settlement. The Australian continent was to be a southern anchor of British military and economic presence in Asia.

This is what gave birth to our country and caused the dispossession of the First Nation People. A story which should remind us daily of the cataclysmic consequences of invasion.

In the 20th century we saw two hostile great powers shift their attitude towards Australians based not on the actions of our people, but on the designs of our great power partners and allies.

In 1941, Japan pushed south towards the Australian continent. Their object was not to invade or remove Australian troops from the fight. Instead, it was to prevent the Americans from using the continent as a spring board for their counter-attack on Japan.

The ‘Battle for Australia’, such as it was during WW2, was thus about the value of the continent for Japan and America and not the actual people living on top of it.

In the Cold War we saw a similar pattern play out. Early on the USSR was largely indifferent to Australia, a remote and militarily insignificant western state.

That began to change as we made our land more valuable to our now alliance partner, the United States. In a move that initially began as a cost saving effort – offering the US access to our land to help keep our own defence spending low — (I did say we were frugal), it was found that thanks to their location on the globe, facilities at Pine Gap and Nurrungar

could peer deep into the Soviet Union, observing key military facilities otherwise inaccessible to US collection efforts.

This value of Australian land to the United States in turn brought it to the attention of the USSR. It seems clear that after these efforts to support our ally, our continent was placed on Soviet nuclear targeting lists.

This is a key paradox we must grapple with in any plan for self-reliance: *Our greatest security and greatest threat depend on how valuable we are to our allies.*

The superficial answer to this is to suggest we should not have allies.

But that misunderstands the issue. Japan did not need to see an alliance in 1941 to realise that the size and position of the Australian continent made it a vital piece of real estate for projecting power into Asia.

We already know the US sees the opportunities of this unsinkable aircraft carrier today, one located at the outer edges of current Chinese missile capacity. We should be under no illusions that strategists in Beijing also see the value of this continent – if only to deny its purchase to the Americans.

Thus, even if territorial invasion is unlikely, and our own relations with China peaceful, the likelihood of an effort to forcefully dissuade, isolate and remove Australian territory from American hands is likely.

Properly recognising the value of our land means that we should also get beyond the frightened fear that America will abandon us at any moment.

That we can never say no to Washington, lest it decide we're not worth the effort. Far from it. Unlike the Cold War and Post-Cold War period, though somewhat akin to WW2, Australia's location today is of great value to the US position in Asia. So we need not fear distinguishing when we have clear differences of interests and values from the US and saying so.

Going to the extremes of either horn of the paradox – to abandon or blindly embrace our allies, is unhelpful. Yet we will need an answer to this paradox. As we saw with the Soviets, how we engaged with the US defined how the adversaries thought about our continent. It is likely that we will want to do more with the US on the Australia continent, fully conscious this may invite greater antagonism from China. This may be a risk worth taking, but it is one that should consciously factor into our defence plans and discussions with the public.

What then should be the key message of this half-time break, this moment of pause as we re-gather for another long stretch out on the field?

First, we need stop trying to give ‘110%’ and being over-extended. Instead we must return to the fundamentals. This means reducing our global footprint to have a larger tread closer to home. Learning to say no to requests that we can’t meaningfully resolve and re-orienting Western individual and collective defence policies around direct defence. Only by doing so will we meet both our commitment to the alliance and to the public who pays for national defence.

Second, we must return the discussion of geography to our strategic debates. Doing so quickly makes irrelevant the question of a ‘choice’ about the US or China. It also demonstrates the absurdity of a mid-sized nation wanting to exert global influence while its own island is increasingly at risk. Not because of who we are, but where we are, and the value of what we claim.

Third, we need to work out how we can use this unique platform of ours to give America a sustainable and enduring position to project power into Asia. How might new capabilities such as the F-35, in conjunction with partners such as Japan offer new means of cooperation. Beginning from a secure foundation on our northern shores that looks north to Asia and west

into the Indian Ocean. What roles should Australia play in supporting and sustaining this very different picture of the ANZUS alliance?

Fourth, we need to work out how to exert the maximum strategic impact from our geography. Because it is quite possible that we will need to be reliant on ourselves much more often. Facing off against low-level political and strategic pressure from 21st century authoritarian powers, perhaps even a direct military threat. How can just 25 million people defend 10% of the world's surface? There are answers there, but we need to learn what our geography can tell us.

Finally, we should find a new language instead of the term self-reliance. This term has always been used by Australians to mean an exception to usual practice. Self-Reliance was we did in the worst case scenario, or did on the margins while normal allied cooperation was the mainstay. Instead we should think of this issue as most other countries do. Defending ourselves is our task and our primary responsibility. We will build alliance cooperation on top of this, we will seek to use our geography to support and sustain a regional order that has been very valuable to us. But what we do alone is not the exception, but a fundamental part of a re-invigorated, and resilient approach.

So let us take this moment to rethink and regroup. The siren calling us back onto the pitch is sure to blast very soon, and the next half is going to be even tougher. But with a better plan, based on the fundamentals, I am confident the game's momentum will soon run our way.