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THE DRAGON ON AUSTRALIA'S HORIZON

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Exercise Solo Flight

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THE DRAGON ON AUSTRALIA’S HORIZON

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THE DRAGON ON AUSTRALIA'S HORIZON

INTRODUCTION

When Australian diplomats consider their foreign policy, an image of a dragon on the horizon comes to mind. China's impact on Australia in the past 50 years has been profound. Australia with many other countries has watched China's economic rise and sought to benefit from the average 9.1% Real GDP Growth since 1992.¹ This has developed over successive Australian governments to China being the largest trading partner with the trade of goods over 2017-18 at almost \$175 billion. The Sino-Australian trade partnerships make up 28% of Australia's total trade.² Despite diplomatic issues such as the Chinese missile tests in 1996 and claims of Chinese interventionism in 2017, Australia officially remains "Strongly committed to strong and constructive ties with China... and to share responsibility for regional and global security."³ However, how much can you embrace a dragon without getting burnt?

The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper focuses heavily on fostering open, inclusive relationships with liberal democracies.⁴ This ideology is a vital part of the region's status quo which Australia has enjoyed since WW2. In recent years China has been challenging the status quo in South East Asia (SEA) and the South Pacific (SP). Australia has historically influenced these traditional ethnic areas as a self-professed regional leader with support from the US and Japan. In 1996, Australia was criticised by the Chinese media and described to be a bat that could not decide whether it was a mammal or a bird.⁵ This describes Australia's complicated position

¹ Census and Economic Information Centre, "China Real GDP Growth," 2019, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/china/real-gdp-growth>.

² Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Factsheet: China" (Canberra, 2018), <https://dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/Documents/chin.pdf>.

³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "2017 Foreign Policy White Paper" (Canberra, 2017), <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dr Stephen Sherlock, "Australia's Relations with China: What's the Problem?," Parliament of Australia - Current Issues Brief, 1997,

of alignment with liberal democracies, like the US, while trading with China. As identified in an article in the Economist, “Australian politicians fear having to choose between America and China.”⁶

This essay will argue that China’s expansion into SEA and the SP will challenge the liberal democratic nature of Australia’s foreign policy and its traditional role in the region. Australia is arguably at its most significant nexus of regional diplomacy as neither the fall of Singapore or the spread of communism challenged the fundamental stance of supporting liberal democracies as the path to stability and prosperity. The complexity surrounding decisions towards China in the region will impact the future of Australia and its regional and global alliances. The essay will evaluate Australia’s foreign policy by using a combination of design thinking methods to outline the current situation, identify possible scenarios that may eventuate in 2050 and the likely challenges and opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

The design methods used are from the Australian Defence Force Joint Military Appreciation Process (JMAP) doctrine and the Canadian Government Policy Horizons. The JMAP and Horizon’s Foresight methodology were used to frame the current situation, identify critical drivers for change and synthesise possible future scenarios.

https://www.aph.gov.au/sitecore/content/Home/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/CIB9697/97cib23.

⁶ “Australian Politicians Fear Having to Choose between America and China,” The Economist, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/10/25/australian-politicians-fear-having-to-choose-between-america-and-china>.

The Framing step in JMAP is used when “confronting an adaptive, interactively complex, and/or ill-structured problem and it... enables enhanced situational understanding.”⁷ It has been used to:

- a. identify the problem statement; and
- b. map a system of China’s involvement in SEA and SP.

The Foresight method is used to “explore plausible, alternative futures and identify the challenges and opportunities that may emerge.”⁸ It is not forecasting, which uses past data and extrapolates using simulations and other tools. It has been used to:

- a. identify and challenge assumptions, and
- b. identify change drivers and possible scenarios.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The emergence of Chinese power and the cultural/political concept of ‘外国人’ (wài guó rén - foreigner) in SEA and the SP is rapidly replacing the existing economic and political structures allowing the unregulated growth of select national and transnational structures, which in turn threatens the stability and the open prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region.

CURRENT SITUATION

Australia's current foreign policy is centred on political cooperation between liberal democracies, particularly the US, and economic trade between regional powers, particularly China; it is based along five priorities.⁹ While maximizing

⁷ Department of Defence, “Joint Military Appreciation Process Doctrine,” Australian Defence Force, Canberra, 2017.

⁸ Policy Horizons Canada, “Horizons Foresight Method” (Ottawa, 2016), <https://horizons.gc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2016-271-overview-eng.pdf>.

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.”

business opportunities is convergent with China's global approach and the safety of Australians is neutral, three of the five priorities will challenge their *modus operandi*:

- a. an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region;
- b. promote and protect global rule-based order; and
- c. support the resilience of the PI and Timor-Leste.

It is along these three lines that Australia's balanced approach will be tested.

In 2016, the PRC Ambassador to Fiji stated that the strategic goal of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is domestic strength and the Chinese Dream,¹⁰ however the methods used undermine what the Australian foreign policy is aiming to support.

There are numerous examples of how China has used its power that has made many countries, including Australia and the US wary. The mobilisation of its military and the use of Anti-access Area Denial (A2AD) systems around the Spratley Islands in the South China Sea have demonstrated the willingness to disregard international law and influence one of the busiest trade routes in the world. The building of a 1000-yard wharf in Vanuatu in 2017 is an example of extensive chequebook diplomacy to garner support and influence the Pacific island states.¹¹ While there are immediate economic advantages for the relevant PI governments and China, it is likely that the cost of repaying the concessional loans will destabilise the region. This demonstrates the level of China's concern for the resilience of the PI. Finally, there is the use of China's 'Magic Weapons'¹² to rally and coordinate ethnic Chinese (wealthy individuals or social groups) to influence and interfere with Australian and New

¹⁰ Zhang Ping, "Chinese Foreign Policy and China-Fiji Relationship," Embassy of the People Republic of China to the Republic of Fiji, accessed December 15, 2018, <http://fj.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxx/dsjh/t1368452.htm>.

¹¹ Ben Bohane, "South Pacific Nation Shrugs Off Worries on China's Influence," The New York Times, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/world/asia/vanuatu-china-wharf.html>.

¹² In September 2014 Xi Jinping gave a speech on the importance of united front work— political influence activities—calling it one of the CCP's "magic weapons"

Zealand politics in support of the CCP's agenda.¹³ In the near future, the Belt and Road initiative through the Indo-Pacific region has the capability to undermine all of Australia's current foreign policy objectives.¹⁴

To counter other political ideologies, Australia has looked to international partnerships to help stabilize the region. The current foreign policy White Paper highlights the importance of maintaining the US engagement in the SP and SEA.

"Without strong US political, economic and security engagement, power is likely to shift more quickly in the region, and it will be more difficult for Australia to achieve the levels of security and stability we seek."¹⁵

Australia has prospered with the stability of varying international partnerships. These relationships have been based on common ideologies and trade interests. The alternative view is Australia's future is best served with China as its main ally in the region and the globe. While the advantages to this are considerable in the region, the cost to liberal democracy and the potential stability and openness of the Indo-Pacific region are immense. The advantages are immediate; however, the disadvantages lie in the future.

DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

There are many developing trends, both in the region and globally, that will impact Australia and the Indo-Pacific region in the future. Of note, there are five which will likely have the most significant impact on how countries engage in the

¹³ Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Un Xi Jinping" (Washington DC, 2017),

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/for_website_magicweaponsanne-mariesbradyseptember2017.pdf.

¹⁴ Xi Jinping, "Speech by President Xi's at Opening of Belt and Road Forum," Xinhua news, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

¹⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "2017 Foreign Policy White Paper."

Indo-Pacific region and how Australia can leverage power and influence for their benefit. These drivers for change are:

Climate Change

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that Global warming will likely reach 1.5 degrees above the pre-industrial level between 2030 and 2052. Increases in global warming will cause "long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems."¹⁶ These impacts would decrease food production, increase sea levels and lead to migration from the worst hit areas, such as SEA and the PI.

Population Growth

The UN estimates that the world's population may be over 10 billion people by 2050. China will be the second largest population after India. Indonesia will have another 80 million citizens, and Papua New Guinea will almost double in size despite the limited land available.¹⁷ This growth will place enormous pressure on already burdened developing nation's government services and infrastructure. Instability and violence are likely with the continued polarization of wealth and distribution of essential governance and human needs.

Urbanisation

In 2050, it is projected that 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas.¹⁸ 82% of the world's urban population will be in the least developed regions

¹⁶ Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, "AR5 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2014," 2014, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>.

¹⁷ United Nations - Population Division, "World Population Prospects," United Nations, 2017, <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

¹⁸ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "68% of the World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN | UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs," United Nations, 2018, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

with almost 2 billion people in slums or informal settlements.¹⁹ The increase of size and number of megacities will lead to higher instances of insecurity where states may not have a monopoly on the use of force. This is particularly relevant in areas of ethnic and cultural instability such as the Solomon Islands and Banda Aceh.

Diplomacy

In the Trump administration, career diplomats make up only a third of the state department with the remaining two-thirds being political appointees. In China, diplomats are increasingly nationalistic with strict pillars of national victimization, fixed cultural lenses of countries like the US and Japan and divergent patriarchal views of the role in the region.²⁰ The use of technology and particularly social media is changing public diplomacy to a form of private diplomacy. This trend results in leaders influencing their population at the individual level with high tempo diplomacy impacting volatile situations such as the South China Sea and degrading the stabilizing effect of globalisation.

Technology

The sophistication and capability of technology will not only increase, but it will likely fundamentally change how we operate as we continue through the 5th industrial revolution. The emergence of AI, human augmentation, robotics and the virtual world will challenge an individual's identity and state-based global power structures. It will continue to polarize the population with those who can leverage

¹⁹ Modernisation and Strategic Planning Division - Australian Army Headquarters, "Future Land Warfare Report 2014," 2014, www.army.gov.au/Our-future.

²⁰ "A not so diplomatic future" *Future Tense – Australia Broadcasting Corporation*, 12 January 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/futuretense/a-not-so-diplomatic-future/9980946>.

technological advances and those who cannot. Furthermore, autocratic countries, like China, with questionable human rights records will not be similarly constrained by ethical conduct of individual rights and will likely have an advantage in its development and employment.

POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

In 35 years, there are infinite possibilities that would impact Australia and its position in the region and the globe. In order to be succinct, only two possibilities will be discussed which are directly impacted by China. Firstly, the continued expansion of the PRC, under the CCP, into the region will test Australia's diplomacy and management of the region. Secondly, the fundamental change in the global power paradigm that sees the reduction of a state's power of the population and the collapse of the CCP as PRC's government. In both scenarios Australia faces numerous challenges; however, there are similar challenges that address assumptions in the current foreign policy.

Scenario One

In the first scenario, China competes with the US and India for resources and influence in a fragmented multipolar world; however, China is the regional hegemon. The PRC expands its military and economic influence into SEA and SP as part of its need to secure global resources to maintain its population and therefore the stability of its regime.

The change drivers stress traditional governance structures but support the consolidation of power. Climate change has seen a significant reduction in land and, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the loss of territories as islands cease to exist. There are significant reductions in food production and access to medical supplies and water. Population growth and

urbanization have led to several megacities in SEA with governance structures incapable of maintaining services to all areas. The outlying areas receive little to no support for governments. The polarization of the population along wealth and access to services increase ethnic tensions with frequent civil uprisings. State governments consolidate power at their main population centres while using the outlying areas and islands to maintain production. Political powers compete openly and subversively through cyber for the attention and allegiance of cultural, social and transnational groups and companies. Technology has further increased the divide amongst the population. Wealth has allowed for greater connectivity and increased bio-engineered health. AI has supported increased surveillance and control of core and vital areas while robotics is used in mass production and security in outlying islands and resource-rich areas

The impact on regional actors is profound with medium and large powers competing through diplomacy and small scale military actions. China uses economic support to gain access to resource-rich areas, transport nodes and markets. The PLA supports the security of nodes, sea lanes and air corridors throughout SEA and SP as part of the BR initiative. Autonomous lethal robotics across all domains are used as conventional defensive A2AD and offensive grey zone actors to monopolise China's access to the area. Australia, isolated from the SEA and SP market, is forced to increase trade with China and India to maintain economic growth. It leverages support from the US and Europe to erode support for China; however, the increase in nationalist governments has led to many countries choosing a foreign policy of isolationism. These governments and the power of transnational companies has eroded the power of global governance and security entities such as the UN. The US and India continue to support Australia as a linchpin of the Indo-Pacific region. The

fractured multipolar world supports nationalist governments and degrades interoperability for most countries and organisations across regions.

Scenario Two

In the second scenario, the transnational global pressures increase cooperation between countries and investment in global and regional NGOs; a networked multipolar world. China's efforts to stabilize the country through its economy and foreign trade fails. The CCP government collapses from the internal pressure from regional instability, a stagnating economy and the resultant pressure from the large middle class.

The effects of the change drivers on individual states are less pronounced as a result of the increased cooperation and the openness of diplomacy and trade. Climate change has heavily impacted areas of SEA and the SP; however, the instability and mass migration of its population have led to a renewed focus by regional and global powers to stabilize the region. Population growth and urbanisation have also resulted in powerful megacities; however, access to the global market and aid has supported governance and mitigated some of the effects of the divide between demographics. The diffusion of national power between states, non-traditional social groups and transnational companies has stabilized the population through a symbiotic power relationship. Technology has increased the connectivity, security, production of essential resources and services while mitigating the adverse effects of climate change.

The increase in cooperation between traditional and non-traditional power structures as a result of global threats leads to a moderated and stable effect on relevant stakeholders. The collapse of the socialist government of the PRC leads to a democratic movement in China similar to the early 20th century. As seen at the end of

the dynastic era of China's history, the rise of democracy in China will see a heavy focus on domestic affairs to redefine the governmental and cultural power structures. This is unlikely to abate the pressures from the change drivers listed above; however, it will likely promote greater support from the international community. The dependency on globalization will temper the use of national power to exploit SEA and the SP for resources to support the population. This trade will support the stabilization of economies in the region, particularly after the collapse of the Chinese economy has impacted each state. As China's influence of SEA and SP shrink, India's influence, particularly in the SP, will grow along with transnational companies. Australia will again find itself at the linchpin of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges

The rise of China's influence is inevitable and also necessary to Australia's interests; however, there are numerous challenges involving SEA and SP. These challenges involve Australia's relationships with China, the region and global powers.

Firstly, Australia will need to balance its approach to China for continued economic development while supporting liberal democracies to ensure the openness of the region. China's political and cultural ideology is unlikely to consider the needs of the region and countries like Australia equally. The domestic focus of their foreign policy may seek to monopolise access to the region to the detriment of Australia. The resilience of the region's democracies will be under economic and governance pressure as are a result of global changes. China cannot be either denied access to nor given power over the governments in the region.

Secondly, Australia will need to maintain a balanced investment of other states and entities to stabilize the region while each country is pressure by global threats and

their associated regional impacts. China's whole of government approach cannot be matched by any country within the region; therefore investment of other states and entities is essential to compete. The most crucial areas are the economy and governance.

Thirdly, Australia will need to balance the development of the SP while ensuring its own domestic priorities. The SP contains some of the most vulnerable populations in the region due to its geography. The various countries have been traditionally supported by Australia and other countries with economic aid and even military support to maintain stability. Australia itself will be under threat from global pressures; particularly climate change. There will be continued pressure to focus domestically to create greater prosperity and cede the responsibility of the stabilization of the area to China, who will appear to have greater capacity. Australia's foreign policy will be tested not by its actions but by balancing priorities and compromise to achieve a whole of government strategy that competes with China's consolidated influence without using hard power.

Opportunities

Australia's position in the region both geographically and diplomatically creates several opportunities with which to stabilize and ensure the openness of the Indo-Pacific region. Firstly, geographically it provides unparalleled strategic access to the region across most domains. While China may control northern approaches, Australia's position supports approaches to the SP and through the Indonesian archipelago. Secondly, Australia's vast territory provides some resilience to the effects of global change. Advances in technology can support the mass production of sustainable energy, food and other likey resources. These resources, along with intellectual property, would increase Australia's trading power with China and also

support SEA and the SP. Thirdly, immigration over the years has led to a multicultural world that not only benefits Australia's economy but also ties it to the region culturally. China is observed as an outsider to the region which impacts its ability to influence politically. Opportunities for Australia may mitigate the challenges by increasing Australia's national power and resilience.

CONCLUSION

The impact of global threats and China's expansion into SEA and the SP will test Australia's current foreign policy and security environment. The government's fundamental pillar of supporting liberal democracies will be tested by the country's need to embrace China to ensure continued economic growth. However, to abandon this pillar would only result in a cascade of effects leading to the instability of the region and the potential for China to contain it for its economic resources to support its vast needs. Australia needs to challenge China's expansion by leveraging its potential in primary industries, science and technology and the continued investment of other liberal states and entities. Alternatively, in China's absence, the region may also be manipulated by other nation states or even transnational mega-corporations. Furthermore, the future of the US and India with the increase in populism and nationalism in politics will also heavily impact Australia's future. The challenge for Australia and the region is to balance investment by states and other entities to support a stabilizing effect. Australia's position in the Indo-Pacific region is between a rock and a hard place; however, its foreign policy is robust and resilient, and it does not seem likely that it needs to sever a limb... yet.

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