

## Australians should fear the rise of China

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It is likely to lead to intense security competition with the US — and considerable potential for war

The United States has been the most powerful state on the planet for many decades, and has deployed robust military forces in the Asia-Pacific region since the early years of the second world war. The American presence has had significant consequences for Australia and for the wider region. This is how the Australian government sees it, at least according to the 2009 Defence White Paper: ‘Australia has been a very secure country for many decades, in large measure because the wider Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and stability underwritten by US strategic primacy.’ The US, in other words, has acted as a pacifier in this part of the world.

However, according to the very next sentence in the White Paper, ‘That order is being transformed as economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power.’ The argument here, of course, is that the rise of China is having a significant effect on the global balance of power. In particular, the power gap between China and the United States is shrinking and in all likelihood ‘US strategic primacy’ in this region will be no more. This is not to say that the US will disappear; in fact, its presence is likely to grow in response to China’s rise. But the US will no longer be the preponderant power in the Asia-Pacific region, as it has been since 1945.

The most important question that flows from this discussion is whether China can rise peacefully. It is clear from the Defence White Paper — which is tasked with assessing Australia’s strategic situation out to the year 2030 — that policymakers in Canberra are worried about the changing balance of power in Asia. Consider these comments from that document: ‘As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these

powers.’ At another point in the White Paper, we read that, ‘Risk resulting from escalating strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably, and is a factor to be considered in our defence planning.’ In short, the Australian government seems to sense that the shifting balance of power between China and the US may not be good for peace in the neighbourhood.

Now, Australians should be worried about China’s rise, because it is likely to lead to intense security competition between China and the US, with considerable potential for war. Moreover, most of China’s neighbours, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam, and, yes, Australia, will join with the US to contain China’s power. To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully.

It is important to emphasise, however, that I am not arguing that Chinese behaviour alone will drive the security competition that lies ahead. The US is also likely to behave in aggressive ways, thus further increasing the prospects for trouble in the Asia-Pacific region.

Naturally, not everyone will agree with my assessment of the situation. Many believe that China can rise peacefully, that it is not inevitable that the US and a powerful China will have confrontational relations. Of course, they assume that China will have peaceful intentions; and that welcome fact of life can help facilitate stability in this region, even though the underlying balance of power is expected to change dramatically.

But consider what China is doing today. It is building military forces that have significant power projection capability, and as the Defence White Paper tells us, China’s ‘military modernisation will be increasingly characterised by the development of power projection capabilities’. For example, the Chinese are building naval forces that can project power out to the so-called ‘Second Island Chain’ in the Western Pacific. And they also are planning to build a ‘blue water navy’ that can operate in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. For understandable reasons, they want to be able to protect their sea-lanes and not have to depend on the American navy to handle that mission for them. Although they do not have that capability yet, as Robert Kaplan points out in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, ‘China’s naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-20th-century US naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued for sea control and the decisive battle.’

Of course, most Chinese leaders think that their navy is defensively oriented, even though it has considerable offensive capability and will have much more in the future. Indeed, they refer to their naval strategy as ‘Far Sea Defence’. As Kaplan’s comments indicate, it seems almost certain that as the Chinese navy grows in size and capability, none of China’s neighbours, including Australia, will consider it to be defensively oriented. They will instead view it as a formidable offensive force. Thus, anyone looking to determine China’s future intentions by observing its military is likely to conclude that Beijing is bent on aggression.

China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the US dominates the Western Hemisphere. For good strategic reasons, China will seek to maximise the power gap between itself and potentially dangerous neighbours like India, Japan and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on the warpath and conquer

other countries in the region, although that is always a possibility. Instead, it is more likely that Beijing will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour to neighbouring countries, much as in the way the US makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.

Why should we expect China to act any differently than the US has over the course of its history? Are they more principled than Americans are? More ethical? Are they less nationalistic than Americans? Less concerned about their survival? They are none of these things, of course, which is why China is likely to imitate the US and attempt to become a regional hegemon.

So how will China's rise affect Australia? There is no question that geography works to Australia's advantage; it is located far away from China and there are large bodies of water separating the two countries. Australia, of course, faced a similar situation with regard to Imperial Japan, which helps explain why the Japanese military did not invade Australia when it went on a rampage across the Asia-Pacific region in December 1941.

One might be tempted to think that Australia's location means that it has little to fear from China and therefore it can stay on the sidelines as the balancing coalition to contain China comes together. Indeed, the 2009 White Paper raises the possibility that 'an Australian government might take the view that armed neutrality was the best approach in terms of securing its territory and people'. This is not going to happen, however, because China — should it continue its rapid rise — will eventually present a serious enough threat to Australia that it will have no choice but to join the American-led alliance to contain China. I would like to make three points to support this claim.

First, please remember that we are not talking about the threat posed by today's Chinese military, which does not have a lot of power projection capability and is not much of a danger to its neighbours. We are talking about how Australians will think about China after it has undergone two more decades of impressive economic growth and has used its abundant wealth to build a military that is filled with highly sophisticated weaponry. We are talking about a Chinese military that comes close to rivaling the US military in terms of the quality of its weaponry. That Chinese military, however, should have two important advantages over its American counterpart. It should be larger, maybe even much larger, since China's population will be at least three times bigger than the US population by the middle of this century. Furthermore, the US will be at a significant disadvantage in its competition with China, because the American military will be projecting its power across 6,000 miles of ocean, while the Chinese military will be operating in its own backyard. In short, China is likely to have far more offensive military power in 2030 than it has in 2010.

Second, although Imperial Japan did not launch an amphibious assault against Australia in 1942, it seriously contemplated that option, and decided against it not only because of the difficulty of the operation, but also because Japan thought that it had an alternative strategy for dealing with Australia. Specifically, it felt that it could use its control of the Western Pacific to effectively blockade Australia and neutralise it. Although that strategy failed, we should not lose sight of the

fact that Imperial Japan was a grave threat to Australia, which is why Australia enthusiastically fought alongside the US in the second world war.

Third, Chinese strategists are going to pay serious attention to Australia in the years ahead, mainly because of oil. China's dependence on imported oil, which is already substantial, is going to increase markedly over the next few decades. Much of that imported oil will come out of the Middle East and most of it will be transported to China by ship. For all the talk about moving oil by pipelines and railroads through Burma and Pakistan, the fact is that maritime transport is a much easier and cheaper option. The Chinese, of course, know this and it is one reason why they are planning to build a blue water navy. They want to be able to protect their sea-lanes that run to and from the Middle East.

China, however, faces a major geographical problem in securing those sea-lanes, which has significant implications for Australia. Specifically, there are three major water passages that connect the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Otherwise, various south-east Asian countries separate those two large bodies of water. That means China must have access to at least one of those passages at all times if it hopes to be able to control its sea-lanes to and from the oil-rich Middle East.

Chinese ships can go through the Straits of Malacca, which are surrounded by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, or they can go further south and traverse either the Lombok Strait or the Sunda Strait, both of which cut through Indonesia, and both of which bring you out into the open waters of the Indian Ocean just to the north-west of Australia. China, however, is not likely to be able to get through the Straits of Malacca in a conflict with the US, because Singapore, which is closely allied with Washington, sits astride that passageway. This is what Chinese strategists call 'the Malacca dilemma'. Therefore, China has a powerful incentive to make sure its ships can move through the two main openings that run through Indonesia.

This situation almost certainly means that China will maintain a significant military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia and maybe even on Indonesian territory. China will for sure be deeply concerned about Australia's power projection capabilities, and will work to make sure that they cannot be used to shut down either the Lombok or Sunda Straits or threaten China shipping in the Indian Ocean. The steps that China takes to neutralise the threat that Australia poses to its sea-lanes — and remember, we are talking about a much more powerful China than exists today — will surely push Canberra to work closely with Washington to contain China. In short, there are serious limits to how much geography can shield Australia from an expansive China.

The picture I have painted of what is likely to happen if China continues its impressive economic growth is not a pretty one. Indeed, it is downright depressing. I wish that I could tell a more optimistic story about the prospects for peace in the Asia-Pacific region. But the fact is that international politics is a nasty and dangerous business and no amount of good will can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia. And there is little doubt that there is one on the horizon.

John J. Mearsheimer is professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of, among other books, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. He was a guest of the Centre for International Security Studies at the University of Sydney. This is an extract from his Hintze Lecture at the university's Great Hall in August.

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