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The 2010 Sir Herman Black Lecture: Review of major international strategic policy developments of 2010



an address to the Institute on 25 November 2010 and slightly updated since by

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Andrew Shearer reviews the major international strategic policy developments of 2010 and comments on what they might mean for Australia and for our national security. He focuses on four themes: reverberations from the financial crisis; leadership, democracy and the weakness of the West; shifts in global power; and stresses and strains in the international system. These trends will continue in 2011, subject to two critical variables: the rate at which the economies of the West recover; and the sustainability of China's growth.

The Royal United Services Institute has long been committed to promoting Australia's national security, so it is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you again to deliver the annual Sir Herman Black Lecture².

In reviewing 2010's major strategic policy developments, I do not wish to provide a chronology of the past year, nor an exhaustive account of its national security events. Rather, I would like to highlight some key emerging themes and to interpret what the major international events of 2010 may mean for Australia and our national security.

For Australia, perhaps the most pressing security preoccupation for 2010 was our continuing involvement in the coalition counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. Despite dwindling public support for the war, Australia renewed its commitment to the allied campaign with a 50 per cent increase in civilian personnel following the announcement of the Dutch withdrawal in February. The Dutch withdrawal reflected a broader loss of confidence in the mission throughout the Western alliance, prompted by uneven military progress, increasing coalition casualties and, for a time, the Obama administration's seeming equivocation about the mission. For Australians, 2010 was the most dangerous and deadly year in Afghanistan to date. Ten of Australia's 21 fatalities³ occurred in 2010, and sixty personnel were wounded compared to 37 in 2009.

The current political dynamics surrounding the war in Afghanistan are also reflective of the broader trends

that I want to address today. One is the doubt cast on future Western defence capabilities stemming from austerity measures taken by alliance partners, such as the recent and substantial cuts to the United Kingdom's defence budget. Another is the diluted political mandate within several Western countries at the moment.

The 2010 debate on Afghanistan in the Australian parliament, the first of its kind in the nine years of the war, was brought about primarily by the more contested political space resulting from a hung parliament, and in particular by the gains made by the left-leaning Australian Greens at Labor's expense. Similar political trends were evident elsewhere, with centre-left parties suffering reverses in the United Kingdom elections, which also delivered a hung parliament, and the United States mid-term Congressional elections overturning a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. The war in Afghanistan also highlights some of the other major trends evident during 2010, including renewed debate about the durability of United States power and leadership, particularly against the backdrop of the rise of China and India. Finally, the conflict highlights growing weariness with international efforts to combat terrorism, despite a series of thwarted attacks during the year which highlighted the continuing threat posed by the global jihadist movement.

Many of these trends predate 2010, and I addressed some of them in last year's lecture. Today I want to focus on four sets of developments which in some respects have reinforced those trends and in others mark something of a discontinuity:

1. reverberations from the financial crisis;
2. trends in leadership, democracy, and the weakness of the West;
3. shifts in world power dynamics; and

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²For his 2009 lecture see: Andrew Shearer (2010). Review of major international strategic policy developments of 2009. *United Service* 61 (1), 7 – 9 (March 2010).

³Sadly, total Australian combat fatalities in Afghanistan rose to 23 early in 2011.

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