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The 2015 Sir Herman Black Lecture: the year in review

an edited version of an address to the Institute on 16 November 2015 by

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Mr Hartcher examines the strategic character of the world in 2015 and comments on its significance for Australia's national security. He notes that Russia has become a rogue state; China's rise is no longer peaceful; Japan has re-militarised; a new virulent form of terrorism has emerged; sectarian war has broken out within Islam; climate change has become a threat multiplier; and a weakened United States is losing its will and ability to support its allies. After reviewing Australian government responses, he concludes that Australia should be neither fearful nor paranoid, but should rethink its position.

Key words: Australia; Russia; China; Japan; United States; terrorism; Islam; climate change.

In my Sir Herman Black lecture last year (Hartcher 2015), I observed that the strategic character of the world was changing and I identified several trends: the re-emergence of imperialism; the reversion of 'post-modern' states to 'modern'; an arms race in the Asia-Pacific; and Australia's strategic vulnerability, but economic opportunity. I suggested that Australia needed to rethink its post-war strategic dependence on the United States, think independently, cease kowtowing to China and act in its own self-interest. Those trends and needs persist and the picture has not improved in the last twelve months.

Alan Renouf, Australia's most senior diplomat of the 1970s, characterised Australia as "the frightened country whose obsession with security has so obscured and confused the implementation of a rational foreign policy that it has jeopardized relations with her Asian and Pacific neighbours and compromised her status in world affairs" (Renouf 1979). Today I will not talk about risks that Australia faces. Rather, I will identify seven fears that were regarded as 'unreasoning fearfulness' but are now seen as reasoned fears. Over the last twelve months, the following have become realities: Russia has become a rogue state; China's rise is no longer peaceful; Japan has re-militarised; a new virulent form of terrorism has emerged; sectarian war has broken out within Islam; climate change is underway and has become a threat multiplier; and a weakened United States is losing its will and ability to support its allies.

The New Realities

Russia

Russia, post the Cold War, is no longer a super power. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, however, it has become a rogue state with the residual capability and malign intent to do something which would have

been unthinkable only a few years ago, namely to launch a land war in Europe. This threat became a reality in Crimea last year and since then the war has spread to Ukraine. Putin is now threatening to no longer observe the anti-ballistic missile treaty; and his threat must be taken seriously. Russia is acting all around its borders to unsettle its neighbours. We should expect more threatening postures and behaviours.

China

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese strategy had been based on the axiom: "hide our brightness and bide our time"². This is no longer so. Since the Communist Party Congress in September 2013, the biggest congress since the present state was founded in 1949, strategy has been informed by a new catch-phrase: "strive for achievement". Coupled with this change has been concern that China's rise would move from being peaceful to non-peaceful. With the changes we have observed recently in Chinese activities in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea, one has to conclude that China's rise is no longer peaceful. It seeks specific advances in strategic power.

Japan

Following World War II, Japan adopted a pacifist constitution. The fear in Asia over the last half-century, however, has been that Japan would re-militarise. This

²Deng Xiaoping's "24-Character Strategy" first emerged in 1990 in response both to the global backlash from the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and to the Chinese Communist Party's sense of alarm following the collapse of the communist states of Eastern Europe. The strategy provided basic principles on how China should protect its national interests while increasing its interactions with the world. The "24-Character Strategy" has been roughly translated as: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."

[<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm> accessed 29 November 2015]

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fear has now materialised. The new Japanese Government under the leadership of Shinzō Abe has reinterpreted the Japanese constitution so as to position Japan as a “normal” nation. This has had the effect of re-militarising the country, which over time must increase the risk of state-on-state war in East Asia. Japan, though, is not a rogue nation but a valuable ally.

Terrorism – Daesh (Islamic State)

In the Levant³, a virulent new terrorist threat has emerged as a more potent offshoot of al-Qaeda. This group follows a strictly orthodox (fundamentalist) Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam and calls itself ‘Islamic State’ reflecting its aspiration to establish a Muslim caliphate. Indeed, it has now partly realised its aspiration in territory stretching from north-eastern Syria into north-western Iraq. In my view, though, we grant the group a false respectability and do its propaganda for it when we refer to it as ‘Islamic State’; for as I see it, the group is neither Islamic, nor a state. I prefer to refer to it as ‘Daesh’, an acronym for the group’s Arabic name, al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (which translates as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Sunni – Shia War

Sectarian animosity between Sunni and Shia Muslims has existed since the death of Muhammad in 632 CE and has at times flared into open warfare. A re-ignition of sectarian war between Sunni and Shia, long seen as a risk, has become a reality in both Yemen and Syria, with the Sunni cause being championed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and the Shia cause by Iran. This civil war within Islam is drawing in adherents from around the world. Syria in particular is also serving as a training ground for terrorists from around the world supported by Daesh and al-Qaeda. This is not a remote form of warfare.

Climate Change

Climate change, long a threat, has been largely ignored by the current Australian government and the Department of Defence. The effects of climate change on Defence, however, are already being experienced as a more frequent need to respond to intense natural disasters in our region.

In a report for the Climate Council (Barrie *et al.* 2015), former chief of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), Admiral Chris Barrie, has asserted that not only is climate change being experienced now, it has become a ‘threat multiplier’ for military forces globally by escalating poverty and economic shocks. Climate change is a significant and growing national security threat that is undermining the preparedness of the ADF for warfighting. Australia is lagging behind its United

Kingdom and United States allies in preparing its military for climate change, with ADF resources already under strain from the increased need for humanitarian assistance in response to climate-induced disasters.

Strong action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is critical for limiting the security implications of a changing climate, but we already know that the Paris conference on climate change⁴ later this month will not achieve sufficient emission cuts to keep the global temperature increase below 2°C. The hope is that the parties will continue refining their emission reduction goals post the conference, but the projected outcome on present indications is that the tipping point to irreversible climate change will be reached and passed. Climate change is well under way.

United States

For some years now there has been a growing fear that the United States would lose the will and/or the ability to support its allies. That fear has also become a reality.

This change has been closely coupled with the emergence of dysfunction at the heart of the national government, with the Executive Branch (Democrat) and Republican-dominated Congress proving unable to work together – increasingly so as the Republicans are drawn further to the political right by the Tea Party movement. In an attempt to force its will on the Executive, Congress has not hesitated to deny the Executive operating funds and so to shut down the government. Indeed, remarkably, Congress seems to regard a functioning national government as an optional extra and has twice shut it down over minor ideological disputes (*e.g.* abortion). Congress also has legislated across-the-board budget cuts and the Defence budget has not escaped. On the last occasion, these budget cuts set back the Defence capability plan by some three years. Not surprisingly, the wider world now views the United States as a less serious nation-state and as a less reliable ally.

As United States prestige and power have declined there has been an unravelling/dismantling of the post-World War II global order. President Obama announced that a red line would be crossed if Syria’s President Assad continued to use chemical weapons against his people. This line is now being crossed almost daily without a United States response so far. Similarly, China has accelerated its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea in the face of United States warnings, yet the United States response has been both belated and minimal – a ‘freedom of navigation’ patrol by a single destroyer (USS *Lassen*) through the Spratly Islands on 27 October. In reality, China has gotten away with its defiance of the United States.

³Traditionally, ‘Levant’ encompassed all the islands of, and lands bordering, the eastern Mediterranean. ‘Maghreb’ was the corresponding term for the western Mediterranean. In modern usage, ‘Levant’ normally encompasses only Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

⁴21st Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Such an outcome was predicted by Rand Corporation war-gaming. The Rand Corporation has war-gamed a possible conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan and separately over the Spratly Islands. They concluded that, in the long run, the United States would prevail. But events were unlikely to reach this stage in either scenario. In the short run, China would achieve its aims and declare victory before the United States could fully respond.

Ongoing Constants and Emerging Trends

So far this century, we have gone through a transformation of the strategic environment and, in this new environment, paranoia can simply be having all the facts.

I have just discussed seven former fears and threats which have become new realities. There are, of course, constant realities which I have not addressed, such as economic instability, espionage, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and failing nations in the Asia-Pacific. These are constants in the strategic equation and they are no less important than the new realities that I have detailed.

If we are to fully comprehend the strategic character of the world in 2015, in addition to these ongoing constants and the new realities, we also need to recognise some emerging trends. In particular, over the last couple of months, there has been mass migration from the Middle East (especially Syria), North Africa, and western Asia to Europe on a scale not seen since World War II. Indeed, it is on such a scale that it could lead to the fracturing of the Economic Union; certainly that is the most present danger.

Australian Government Responses

Would it be appropriate to characterise the responses of recent Australian governments to these developments in Alan Renouf's "the frightened country" terms? There remains an element of fear, but it should not be overdrawn.

Defence: Fortunately, the Rudd government's Asian Century White Paper (Australian Government 2012) – a Pollyanna-type document that was all about the gains we could expect from Asia and nothing about the inherent risks – has been left behind. It was largely pushed aside by the United States pivot to Asia and Australia's participation in it – through inviting United States marines and aircraft to train in Darwin and its naval ships to use Fremantle. The Gillard government, though, responded by cutting the defence budget down to its lowest level relative to GDP since 1938. This looked like negating the gains of the pivot until the Abbott government began the restoration of defence spending over a 10-year timescale. Notably, two new LHD amphibious assault ships have now entered service with the Royal Australian Navy and these will be a useful addition to the pivot.

Border Security has been a difficult policy area. Large numbers of refugees undermine confidence in the

immigration programme. The actions initiated by the Abbott government, however, have succeeded in 'stopping the boats'. This has restored confidence in Australia's immigration programme and has freed the government to increase the refugee intake in response to the migration crisis in Europe.

Russia: In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its sponsoring of an insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the Australian government has joined international economic sanctions against Russia. These it has ramped up since the shooting down in July 2014 of a Malaysian Airlines passenger plane (Flight MH17) by a Russian-made BUK missile fired from eastern Ukraine – where Russian-backed rebels were fighting Ukrainian forces – killing all 298 people on board, including 38 Australians.

China: The new Turnbull government has also ramped up its rhetoric against China with regard to China's land reclamation activities and misadventures in the South China Sea.

Trade: The Abbott and Turnbull governments have continued to negotiate free-trade agreements and such agreements have recently been signed with China, Japan, Korea and 11 other Trans-Pacific Partnership countries – Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, New Zealand, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam. Separate free-trade agreements with India and possibly Indonesia are expected to follow.

Iraq and Syria: The Abbott government responded to Daesh's activities in Iraq and Syria by deploying some 800 ADF personnel to Iraq, comprising a 400-person air task group (six F/A-18 Hornets; an E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft; and a KC-30A Tanker Transport); an 80-person special operations group; and a 300-person army training team aimed at building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. Since deployment, the ground attack role of the air task group has been extended to Daesh targets in Syria. The Turnbull government has maintained these commitments, but has resisted calls to deploy Australian special forces into Syria, instead increasing efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian and Daesh problems.

Domestic Counter-Terrorism: The Abbott and Turnbull governments have also redoubled intelligence and policing efforts to counter terrorism at home, following terrorist attacks in Sydney in December 2014 and Parramatta in October 2015. The changes have been incremental and have included fine-tuning legislation to combat terrorist activities and to make it harder for Australian nationals to visit Syria or to return to Australia after visiting Syria, especially where they are dual citizens. These are all positive in their own right.

National Optimism: The appointment of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in September 2015 immediately triggered a new spirit of optimism nationally; and subsequent opinion polls have all shown that this optimism is being sustained. The question now is: what

will Turnbull do with the 'political capital' his elevation to the national leadership has generated? A change in style compared with that of his predecessor is immediately evident, an example being a positive, inclusive approach to Australia's Muslim communities. But the nation needs him to go much further and address issues of substance, such as tackling the issue of national independence – its need to have the wit, will and capacity to act independently of allies in its own interests when warranted.

Foreign Policy: In this context, Australia under the Abbott government continued the complaisant attitude to foreign policy of its predecessors. There are positives and negatives associated with our alliance with the United States. The national interests of Australia and the United States, however, do not always coincide. It is, therefore, not in our national interest that we simply adopt the United States foreign policy as our own, as previous Australian governments have tended to do, especially on matters of defence and national security. We need our own defence strategy. That said, the United States is still a great power, although diminished, and the United States alliance remains an asset we should use to our advantage.

Regional Stability: The stability enabled by the post-World War II *Pax Americana* has underpinned the enormous economic progress in our region over the last few decades. That stability is now threatened by the new realities enunciated above and Australia will need to work closely with our regional partners to maintain and improve that stability. Beyond the issues already discussed, Myanmar is of particular concern but shows hope. We must await the outcome of the national elections in late November and the management of their aftermath by the current government with some trepidation. Similarly, the jury is still out on the new government in Indonesia.

Regional Security Architecture: To this end, the time has come for new security architecture for the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which once held out promise in this regard, has been rendered ineffectual as a security body by China. At its last meeting, Cambodia would not allow ASEAN to include anything in its communiqué on the South China Sea disputes which might displease China. Unable to issue even a communiqué because of objections by Cambodia, let alone take common action on security issues, it has been discredited as a security body. A new regional security body is required with a coherent strategy.

Australia as a Role Model: Finally, there have been suggestions that Australia could serve as a national security role model and beacon of civilised values for middle powers in our region. A number of middle powers now are emerging around the region and some seem uncertain as to how they should position themselves and act on regional security issues. Accordingly, there may be a useful role for a more experienced Australia to act as a role model for them. It is a role, though, that Australia would need to develop with sensitivity and tact.

Conclusion

Returning to my opening comments, Australia should neither be fearful nor overly optimistic about the future. We should get all the facts together and rethink our position.

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Questions from the Floor

Question 1: What has contributed most to the decline in the global standing of the United States?

Answer: By his ill-considered and unlawful invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush destabilised Iraq, unleashed Sunni-Shia animosities, and created the conditions for the rise of Islamic State. In the process he seriously weakened United States foreign policy and the United States' standing in the world. His successor, President Barack Obama, went too far the other way. His reluctance to become involved in the Middle East exacerbated the problem and further weakened the global standing of the United States.

Question 2: Should we continue to contribute to all US military adventures abroad? **Answer:** Probably not. The United Kingdom did not contribute to the war in Vietnam; and Canada did not contribute to the war in Iraq. Neither failure to act harmed their respective alliances with the United States. We should only support the United States when it is clearly in our national interests to do so.

The Author: Peter Hartcher, a leading Australian journalist and author, is the political editor and international editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. As such, he is the paper's principal analyst and commentator on national politics and global events. He is also a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy and a political commentator for Sky News television. He has worked as a foreign correspondent in Tokyo and Washington and has twice won Australia's highest journalistic accolade, the Gold Walkley award, and the Citibank award for business reporting. An author of six books, his latest book is *The Adolescent Country* (Penguin: Australia; 2014). He is acknowledged as an independent, non-partisan commentator. [Photo of Mr Hartcher: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson MC]