United Service

Informing the defence and national security debate since 1947

Competing with China

Among the issues recently discussed by our Special Interest Group on Strategy has been a paper published in June by Professor Aaron Friedberg of Princeton titled “Competing with China”[1]. My sense of the paper’s message follows.

There is growing consensus among strategic analysts that United States policies towards China since the end of the Cold War have failed. The principal reason is that the United States and the West misjudged the resilience and determination of the Chinese Communist Party and not least its current leader, Xi Jinping.

The West had expected that, by opening up its markets to China, the Chinese economy would be gradually strengthened and the Chinese would be drawn into the global order developed under United States leadership after World War II. As a consequence, there would be increasing liberalisation of social and political conditions in China over time, leading in turn to China becoming more democratic.

Instead, the Chinese economy has grown much more rapidly than expected; and China’s economic power, and hence its political and military/strategic power, have grown commensurately and continue to grow. At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party has tightened its grip on the community, reducing what democracy there had been.

Rather than joining the global order developed by the United States, China is fast establishing its own competing order and increasingly drawing more nations into its orbit and away from the American one. The Belt and Road Initiative is but one mechanism for doing so. Alienation of parts of the global commons, as in the South China Sea, is another.

Unexpectedly, intellectual competition (political beliefs and ideology), facilitated by influence peddling in target countries and at times by cyber warfare, is now a serious concern.

The United States has suddenly realised that it is facing an unprecedented challenge to its leadership, not only in East Asia and the Western Pacific, but globally. Caught unprepared, the United States does not know how to respond. An alternative approach to China is now urgently required.

Friedberg deduces that the West must face the challenge together as a team, avoiding a repeat of the fracturing over Iran, and that the challenge must be met, in part at least, in ideological terms. He concludes that a sober assessment is now needed of the challenge in all its dimensions and the measures necessary to meet it. These, then, must be clearly articulated to the community in the West.

In addition to gaining a better understanding of what has occurred geopolitically in recent times, are there lessons for Australia from Friedberg’s analysis? Undoubtedly. One would be that the Australian government, parliament and business community, in concert with other international stakeholders, need to cease ‘hoping for the best’ and to actively commence planning and preparing for the increasingly likely less-than-desirable scenarios.

[1]Aaron L. Friedberg (2018). Competing with China. *Survival* **60** (3), 7 – 64.

Middle powers and their strategic relationships

A related issue that also has attracted the attention of the Special Interest Group has been the differing ways in which various middle powers in the Asia-Pacific are managing their strategic relationships in the face of China’s rise. A recent analysis[2] by Hervé Lemahieu of the Lowy Institute suggests there have been four broad responses:

- some countries are continuing to hug the United States through continuing mutual defence treaties;
- others are forging new relationships (multiple bilateral defence partnerships) with other allies who share similar interests and values;
- some, notably Japan, are strengthening their own defence capabilities; and
- the Philippines and a few others appear to be acquiescing to China.

Where does Australia fit in this analysis? Some might argue that Australia is one of the middle powers continuing to hug the United States, but this would only partly explain our response to date.

Yes, we are doing everything we can to maintain our strategic relationship with the United States and to keep America engaged in our region. But we also are strengthening relationships with other regional allies and have increased the number of scheduled international military exercises to this end. We also have rejoined the Australia, India, Japan, United States ‘alliance’, the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, and its associated Malabar military exercises.

As well, while not matching the improvements to Japan’s Self Defence Force, Australia has increased its annual defence investment up to the international benchmark of 2 per cent of gross domestic product. This investment is buying a balanced defence force which is state-of-the-art and interoperable with allies. Its *Achilles’ Heel* is its lack of size.

There are two issues here. The immediate issue is the limited capacity to logistically sustain the current force on operations, *e.g.* to resupply precision-guided munitions, fuel and other war *matériel.* The more fundamental issue is overall force size, especially the size of the land force (one brigade group deployable at any one time), which is far too small to conduct high-level warfighting, except as a small contribution to a much larger allied force. This is compounded by the limited scope for expansion in an emergency.

David Leece[3]

[2]Lowy Institute (2018). *Asia power index 2018* (Lowy Institute: Sydney).

[3]David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is chair of the Institute’s Special Interest Group on Strategy. These are his personal views.