



Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies New South Wales

LETTERS

Middle Powers and Competition with China

Dr Leece's opinion piece about China and Australian defence strategy [*United Service* 69 (3, September), 7 (2018)] avoids the obvious United States handover to Australia of primary responsibility for operations in the south Pacific. The current chief of the Australian Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, has served as deputy commander of United States forces in the south Pacific and the Royal Australian Navy has invested in two amphibious assault vessels each able to carry a battalion of troops to be ferried ashore by either helicopter or landing craft.

The government has adopted an Australian 'Monroe Doctrine' to defend and control the south Pacific area. A brigade of troops armed with modern weapons and support is sufficient for most operations involving Pacific nations. The combined Army-Navy-Air Force first wave capability of two battalions can be backed up by other sea and air transport to insert additional front-line troops onto any Pacific island battlefield if necessary.

The Australian Defence Force is prepared and equipped adequately for the role of policing the south Pacific, although it might need some military and cultural training to be effective.

Denis Ashly Ross

Sunnybank Hills, Queensland, 30 September 2018

Editor's Note: *The Australian Defence Force, with its one deployable combat brigade, may be capable of 'policing' in the south Pacific, but not of fighting alone against a militarily-capable enemy. Such a scenario currently may seem improbable, but its likelihood will increase should strategic competition in our neighbourhood maintain its upward trend as predicted, particularly should America, weary of the cost of a global stance, become more isolationist under Trump or his successor.*

Your opinion piece on middle powers and competing with China, was excellent. You succinctly summarised the situation so well, and concluded with the two glaring flaws in Australia's present huge dilemma: the immediate issue – the limited capacity to logistically sustain the current force on operations; and the more fundamental issue – overall force size ... with an Army which is far too small to conduct high-level warfighting on its own.

There have been many media articles recently on how China's rise threatens our future. And there is now bi-partisan support in America to act against China in trade, cyber security, industrial espionage – even to enter a new 'Cold War'. This follows a recent breakdown in relations with Russia.

How has it come to this? I can remember as a child asking my parents why there had been a war with Germany. My father said we had so run down our defence forces, Hitler had thought we could be easily beaten. It appears that Australia has made this same grave mistake, and also repeated another major mistake – depending entirely on a foreign country, America, to come to its defence.

I believe also that Australia has made a Faustian pact – a deal with the devil – in becoming so dependent economically on trade with China. If we continue on our present path we shall become a vassal state of China, where our terms of trade will be eroded, and our freedom and democracy undermined. Unless we begin with alacrity to build an independent defence force capable on its own to deter China or any other major power, that will surely be our fate.

With our resources and GDP, around the eleventh largest in the world, we should surely have a defence force at least the equal of say, Israel, and that includes a nuclear strike capability. Even North Korea is able to treat us with contempt. Such an enhanced capability would garner wary respect from China and others, strengthen our independence and give us greater leverage with America, knowing that we can deter potential enemies on our own.

Bryn Evans

Scarborough, Queensland, 5 November 2018