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China's growing strategic reach

Experts estimate that China is about half-way through converting its navy from a coastal defence force into a blue-water navy capable of projecting power far from home. In February, three Chinese warships from Hainan passed through the Indonesian archipelago and entered the Indian Ocean through the Sunda Strait. The ships then turned east and passed between Java and Australia's Christmas Island, before turning back north through the Lombok Strait. In June last year, Chinese warships circumnavigated Japan; and in October Chinese warships passed through the 'first island chain',¹ previously their notional maritime boundary, into the western Pacific – in both instances essentially to show the world that they can go where they like.

These events occurred against a background of China's ongoing disputes with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas; and an increasing assertiveness and willingness on China's part to attempt to get what it wants through coercion, if not actual conflict.

More broadly, these developments are set in the context of the declining global influence of the United States and the West more generally. As Professor Graeme Gill explains commencing on page 9, Russia's opportunistic annexation of Crimea in March in the face of the West's impotence has weakened the West globally and strengthened Russia commensurately. Indeed, Russia, under its neo-tsar, Vladimir Putin, is rapidly regaining its strategic confidence and assertiveness.

Nevertheless, the United States remains the World's only superpower; but the limits of its military power have been exposed, and its military, economic and moral authority has been weakened over the last decade by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global financial crisis. China, in contrast, is a rising great power, with an economy second only to that of the United States, and strategic aspirations to match its new status.

China's unwillingness to accept post-World War II borders where they differ from her perceived historic ones and her preference for coercion rather than resort to international law to resolve border disputes, is forcing her neighbours, particularly Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, closer strategically to the United States and to one another. While President Obama asserted on 23 April that the United States-Japan defence pact

applies to the disputed Senkaku Islands which Japan administers, there is increasing doubt among her Asian allies as to her likely capacity and willingness to honour such commitments to allies in the medium term. In Australia, former prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, is advocating ending Australia's strategic dependence on the United States so as to regain our independence in foreign policy and avoid being drawn into wars of no direct relevance to us.²

Such doubts also must be a key issue for the Australian government as it prepares a new defence white paper due for release in March 2015. White papers must look ahead 20 to 30 years given the lead times for acquiring new defence capabilities. This raises the question: in a more uncertain strategic environment in the face of a rising China and possibly a further decline in United States influence in the region, to what extent would it still be prudent to rely on the ANZUS Treaty for our defence against major power conflicts in our region as we have since World War II; and to what extent should we now provide for our own defence? A key test of the white paper will be how rigorously it assesses and resolves this question.

David Leece

¹The 'first island chain' refers to the first chain of major archipelagos east of the East Asian mainland. It encloses the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea and the East and South China Seas.

²Malcolm Fraser, with Cain Roberts (2014). *Dangerous allies* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne).

³David Leece, Editor of *United Service*, is President of the Institute. These are his personal views.