

**Jump TO Article**



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**Jump TO Article**

## **The strategic outlook and Australia's response**

The global strategic outlook remains in a state of flux. Our April lunchtime-lecturer, Professor Clive Williams, noted that the Syrian cease-fire talks have collapsed now that the military momentum has shifted firmly towards Assad and away from the armed opposition and Islamic State. Some coalition partners now consider an Assad-led government would be better than the alternatives. By assisting the armed opposition logistically, the United States is prolonging the conflict and the consequent flow of refugees towards Europe. In Iraq, Bagdad prefers to work with Iran in seeking to defeat Islamic State and is slowly gaining the upper hand. Ninety per cent of Iraqis consider the United States to be the enemy and Western military forces, including the Australians, are unwelcome.<sup>1</sup>

Closer to home, China is demanding to be accepted as the global co-equal of the United States and is determined to entrench its primacy in its neighbourhood. Ignoring the competing territorial claims of its neighbours, it is changing the facts on the ground by establishing naval and air bases in the Spratly and Paracel Islands; in effect, converting the South China Sea into a Chinese lake. United States 'freedom-of-navigation' patrols through the South China Sea and military exercises with its Southeast Asian allies will not alter this new reality.

Our May evening lecturer, Dr Bob Howard of the University of Sydney, noted the parallels between the current global strategic outlook and that prior to World War I. Despite the 'Great Power Peace' that has pertained since 1945, there can be no guarantee that it will survive as we move from a unipolar to a multipolar world; and there is as yet no international organisation that is able to contain large-scale violence. The security community rightly views war as improbable, even unthinkable; and liberal theorists argue that economic inter-dependence makes war too costly for the major powers. But the realists point out that the age-old causes of war have not changed; and states can never be sure of each other's behaviour. We need to bear this in mind as China seeks to dislodge the United States from the Asia-Pacific.

Against this strategic background, in February the Australian government released its long-awaited 2016 Defence White Paper – a summary of it is at pp. 21 – 24. The government seeks to position Australia and the Australian Defence Force for an uncertain strategic outlook over the next 20 years. The paper gives equal weight to defending Australia and its northern approaches; supporting the maritime security of our region; and contributing to a rules-based global order. It outlines ambitious, fully-costed plans to significantly reshape the Navy, Air Force and Army (in order of strategic weight); and to do so, the government will increase defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP by 2020-21.

We need to remember, though, that Australia is at best a middle power; it is more a 'policy taker' than a 'policy

maker' and it has no control over conflicts in the Asia-Pacific; so we will remain a United States ally for the foreseeable future [see Tom Switzer's paper pp. 9 – 12 on the need for a more nuanced alliance]. Security guarantees, though, can be of little value when the chips are down and the question remains whether Australia is doing enough for its own defence.

## **The ADF's preparedness for climate change**

As a former Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie, points out at pp. 13 – 16, climate change has massive security implications, indeed is a security threat multiplier, at national, regional and global scales. Yet, notwithstanding that the security implications of climate change have been a recurring theme in *United Service* and in several books and reports over the last nine years (e.g. Dupont 2007; Dyer 2008; Leece 2008, 2013; Barrie *et al.* 2015; Sturrock and Ferguson 2015), the Australian Defence Force has been slow to address the issue. As a consequence, its preparedness for the security challenges of climate change has fallen well behind that of its allies and friends, especially the militaries of the United States and United Kingdom (Barrie *et al.* 2015; Sturrock and Ferguson 2015). In part, it was constrained in addressing the issue by recent government policy, but those constraints have been lifted (Barrie 2016). It now has much catch-up work to do, including in operational planning, personnel preparation and training, logistics (including fuel and energy sources), and development of appropriately-located, climate-resilient bases. The task is urgent.

**David Leece<sup>2</sup>**

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OPINION is continued on p. 28

<sup>1</sup>A summary of Professor Williams' 26 April 2016 presentation may be accessed on the Institute's website at <http://www.rusinsw.org.au>.

<sup>2</sup>David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is president of the Institute. These are his personal views.