

Defending Australia

China plays a long game and uses soft power wherever possible to achieve its strategic aims. Media attention recently has focused on China’s investment of billions of dollars in Cambodia as part of its Belt-and-Road initiative, including around the Ream naval base on the Gulf of Thailand. If developed in conjunction with a nearby airport (there are at least two from which to choose), it would provide the capability needed to support Chinese projection of naval and air power over the Gulf of Thailand, the southern reaches of the South China Sea, contiguous states and adjacent strategic waterways, including the Malacca Straits.

Such a base also would link well with similar Chinese bases in the South China Sea, at Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Djibouti (near the entrance to the Persian Gulf). It also would be well-positioned to utilise/control Thailand’s planned Kra Isthmus Canal linking the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea, thereby enabling Chinese shipping to bypass the Malacca Straits. Importantly, all the bases mentioned are capable of military use, whether or not China currently intends to use them for military purposes.

As Andrew Hastie MP, chair of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, reminded us in August, such developments must be seen in the context of China becoming a global power; its interference in Australia’s domestic affairs, primarily via manipulation of its diaspora in Australia; its conduct of cyber warfare against Australia; and the challenge it is posing to the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. Also relevant are President Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policies and his tendency to unilateralism and isolationism. Consequently, Australian strategic analysts increasingly are questioning the efficacy of Australia’s current strategic direction and policy settings.

Not least of the questioners is Emeritus Professor Hugh White of the Australian National University. In his just published book, *How to defend Australia* (La Trobe University Press: Carlton, Vic.; 2019), White judges it inevitable that China will come to dominate the East and Southeast Asian periphery, ending America’s primacy, and leading to the collapse of America’s post-war security arrangements, such as the ANZUS Treaty. Middle powers like Australia must look after their own security without expecting support from America or other regional powers. He proposes the complete revision of Australia’s grand strategy, saying we should revert to defending the Australian continent through a strategy of ‘maritime denial’ using submarines, strike aircraft and long-range precision weaponry to deter would-be aggressors. The massive increases in defence expenditure necessitated by this self-reliant posture

would be funded by disposing of unsuitable capabilities (including naval surface combatants and amphibious units) and increased taxation.

While most analysts seem to agree that it is timely to review Australia’s strategic needs, so far little support has emerged for White’s specific prescriptions. Much focus has been on his flagging of the possible need for Australia to acquire nuclear weapons, which is not something he is advocating at this juncture.

In their critique of White’s approach, retired Rear Admiral James Goldrick and Dr Euan Graham of La Trobe University question White’s rejection of alliances. They also consider that White’s fixation on state-on-state conflicts has blinded him to other important challenges such as: climate change – including new sources of interstate conflict induced by it; terrorism; and the capacity for a rival state to foment instability in our environs. Further, his specialised force designed for high-end warfare would be ill-equipped to respond to lower-order threats; his territorial focus would leave our lines of communication vulnerable; and he makes inadequate provision for our dependence on foreign sources of fuel, and for the vulnerability of his complex weapons systems to cyber-attack. In short, there is more to national strategy than fortress defence.¹

The Institute’s commentator on naval matters, Dr Ian Pfennigwerth, a former defence attaché in Beijing, considers that no Asian country is in a position to ‘fight’ China alone. We must learn to live with this reality, while preserving our interests as best we can in coalition with others.

This vital, urgent debate clearly has some distance to run. We are indebted to Andrew Hastie and Hugh White for bringing it so forcefully to national attention. They are correct in saying that we need to invest far more in national defence to create a defence force which is an effective deterrent. But, while ‘fortress Australia’ may be a key component of the strategy, it will be insufficient to our needs which include neighbourhood, regional and global interests. We need to become much less dependent on trade with China and on foreign sources of fuel; and, as well as working with our Indo-Pacific allies, we need to do much more to support our neighbours in the South Pacific – which will necessitate, *inter alia*, addressing the causes of climate change, and a self-reliant defence force, including a much stronger army and a an amphibious capability employable in a hostile air and maritime environment.

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¹James Goldrick and Euan Graham (2019). A fortress with no water supply: Hugh White’s ‘How to Defend Australia’. *The Strategist* 19 July 2019.

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