



**Strategic Challenges Ahead for Australia**

This issue of *United Service* contains the 2020 Sir Hermann Black Lecture (pp. 4-9) in which Hervé Lemahieu reviews Australia’s major strategic challenges of 2020: climate change; the COVID-19 pandemic; and China, including its competition with a diminished United States. These challenges will persist for the foreseeable future. Other papers in this issue expand on these themes.

Major General Kath Campbell explains (pp. 10-13) that the Australian Army’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Division now has responsibility for leading domestic operations and did so during the 2020 bushfire and COVID-19 pandemic crises. She describes the Defence Force’s joint response to the two crises, including interactions with civilian agencies and the wider community.

Dr Keith Suter (pp. 14-16) considers the related issue of improving resilience in Australia. He explains that economic theory and public policy based thereon has oscillated between big and small government, with economic rationalism being the driving force latterly, leading to an unequal society. New thinking is required informed by scenario planning which would enable us to plan for the future and cope with whatever it might hold.

Two book reviews address China. In *China’s grand strategy* (p. 25), Geoff Raby describes China’s global ambitions, its grand strategy and the limitations that China faces, which will make its global ambitions very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. It cannot yet compete against the United States in ‘hard power’ (coercion/warfighting) and lacks ‘soft power’ (persuasion). So, it is exerting ‘sharp’ power, including political interference abroad, investments in overseas assets, cyber warfare and other ‘grey-zone’ activities.

A contrasting picture of China’s hard power emerges (p. 26) from Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt’s book, *China as a twenty-first century naval power*. McDevitt shows that the People’s Liberation Army–Navy (PLAN) has been dramatically transformed into a modern naval force to rival and to challenge any other. China’s warships are not ‘coming’, they are already ‘here’.

**Comment**

China now is seeking forward operating bases (ports/airfields) around the Indian and South Pacific Oceans from which it can project its new maritime power. Of particular relevance to Australia, while Papua New Guinea (PNG) has invited Australia and the United States to upgrade the Manus Island patrol boat base, it has invited a Chinese company to upgrade the Manus airfield (Shugart 2020).

In response to China’s increased interest in our neighbourhood, Australia has launched a ‘Pacific step-up’ – an increase in aid funding for Pacific nations (Foreign Affairs 2017); and has refocused its defence posture on its immediate region with the intent of holding any potential enemy forces as far from the Australian mainland as is practicable (Defence 2020: 21).

Leece and Wolfe (pp. 17-23) explore whether, as part of Australia’s refocused defence posture, there might be a place for forward operating bases in the Indonesian-Melanesian archipelago. They conclude that forward bases may prove difficult to protect in a future conflict. If protectable, however, such bases would enable the range of our combat aircraft and proposed precision strike missiles to be extended further into our region.

In breaking news, Chinese interests have signed a memorandum of understanding with PNG to build a ‘fishing factory’ on Daru Island in the Torres Strait, 200km from the Australian mainland (Tingle 2020) and a second Chinese company is negotiating to build a seaport, an industrial and business zone, a resort and a residential area also on Daru (Whiting 2021). China’s interests in Daru, though, may be more strategic than commercial (Tingle 2020; Whiting 2021).

The outcome of the United States presidential election and transfer of power to the incoming Biden administration are not addressed in this issue. Suffice to say, the actions of the outgoing president, Donald Trump, who incited thousands of his supporters to invade the United States Capitol building on 6 January 2021 with a view to overthrowing the election result, while ultimately unsuccessful, strengthened America’s autocratic opponents, disheartened its democratic allies and left America deeply divided along partisan lines. It is difficult to see how the United States can recover domestically and regain its international standing in the short term.

**RAAF Centenary**

Finally, to mark the centenary of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) on 31 March 2021, we include a review (p. 24) of *Pathfinder, ‘kriegie’ and gumboot governor*, a part autobiography/part biography of Air Marshal Sir James Rowland, sometime bomber pilot, test pilot, aeronautical engineer, RAAF chief, state governor, and university chancellor.

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**References**

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 Whiting, Natalie (2021). Chinese company’s multi-billion-dollar plan to build a city on Papua New Guinean island near Australian border. *ABC News* 5 February 2021.

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