

Australia's strategic position in the Region

Dr Carlo Kopp

AUSTRALIA'S strategic position in the Asia-Pacific-Indian region is now at its weakest - in relative and absolute terms, since the early 1940s – the result of the confluence of two major trends, one of which could not have been avoided, but one that could have been avoided. The unavoidable trend has been the unrelenting arms race across Asia, funded from rapidly growing industrialised economies and enabled by unrestricted access to Russian and Chinese high technology weapons. Conversely, the avoidable trend has been the deeply damaging effect of Australia's underperforming Defence acquisition and planning system. While this may be the root cause of much of Australia's difficulty, the realities of an ongoing two-decade long arms race in Asia would present challenges, even with a perfectly functional acquisition and planning system.

The problems Australia is experiencing in Defence acquisition and planning mirror those in the US and UK, in large part due to the adoption of poor practices and organisational structures introduced in these countries. This historical problem is now openly acknowledged by current and former Defence Ministers and other observers, but not by the current Defence Organisation leadership.

The Asian arms race has produced a realignment in the global military balance of sufficient magnitude to compel the US to abandon its Counter-Insurgency centric ideology and practice of the last decade, and declare publicly a 'strategic pivot' to place Asia and the Indian Ocean region at the top of its priority list. The precarious budgetary situation of the United States will, however, result increasingly over time in the Americans encouraging allies in the region to invest as much as is feasible to cover their own strategic needs.

STRATEGIC IMPACT OF THE ASIAN ARMS RACE

The initiator of the Asian arms race is without doubt China. After the fall of the Soviet Union China embarked on a large scale restructure of its military capabilities, taking advantage of a desperate post-Soviet Russia to buy up every single advanced system the Russians had to offer. Two decades later, China possesses the largest and most modern Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) in Asia; the largest fleet of upper tier combat aircraft in Asia, and if United States downsizing continues unabated, possibly globally; and a growing fleet of surface warships and submarines, also the largest in Asia.

The 'party line' of PRC state propaganda is that these force developments are simply 'modernisation', which also involves some downsizing in fleets and qualitative improvement of force elements. While these statements have an element of truth they do not accord with the restructure and re-equipping of the PLA, resulting in a dramatic increase in reach or overall force structure 'throw weight', or the measure of how many munitions of a given size can be delivered to what distance.

The 'throw weight' metric was widely used during the Cold War for assessing nuclear delivery systems capabilities, especially in ballistic missiles, but it is just as applicable in the era of Precision Guided Munitions (PGM), as it provides a realistic measure of how much damage can be done by a given inventory of terminally guided non-nuclear ballistic missiles, cruise missiles or air-delivered smart bombs. Calculation of 'throw weight' takes an agreed measure of weapon 'weight' (nuclear kilo-

tonnage or conventional warhead mass), multiplies it by the range on an expendable or combat radius of a reusable delivery system, and then multiplies the result by the number of expendable or reusable delivery systems.

Two decades ago the PLAAF and PLANAF was equipped with ~4,000 J-6 (MiG-19) Farmer fighters with day only air intercept capability, several hundred J-7 (MiG-21) Fishbed fighters with slightly better performance, similar limitations, and several hundred Q-5 Fantan strike aircraft, armed with dumb bombs, and comparable in performance and effect to the A-4 Skyhawk. The theatre strike fleet was equipped with 120 – 140 H-6 Badgers, mostly fitted for dumb bombs or freefall nuclear bombs. The Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile inventory was dominated by shorter ranging weapons with Scud class guidance systems. There were no cruise missiles in use other than the 1950s technology 50 nautical mile range class Silkworm/Styx family, specialised for antishipping work. However, two decades of substantial cash injection, a growing domestic industrial base, and almost unlimited access to the Russian technology base have produced unprecedented strategic effect, historically at best comparable to the re-armament of a post-Versailles Germany.

While growth in the Chinese ballistic missile and naval fleets has drawn most Western political and media attention, the greatest growth has been seen in China's air power, which in many respects emulates the model developed by the United States.

A major challenge in assessing the PLA's strength in modern weapons is that exact disclosures on quantities have been scarce, and often a result of the Russian media reporting on exports. A tally of these numbers performed in 2004-2005 indicated a target fleet size of around 400 – 500 aircraft. Current numbers cited are around 100 x dual seat multirole Su-30MKK/MK2 Flanker G, comparable to the Boeing F-15E, and around 200 imported Su-27SK Flanker B, and locally built J-11A/B Flanker B+, comparable to the Boeing F-15A/C. With ongoing production of domestic J-11B, J-11BH, J-11BS, J-11BSH, J-15 carrier based Flanker D, and public discussion of a purchase of the imported Su-35S "Super Flanker", it is evident that the total fleet number will be well in excess of 400 aircraft between 2015 and 2020. For comparison, the USAF fleet of F-15A-E variants peaked at around 600 aircraft, and is declining in size due to retirements.

Considering only the Flanker fleet, the PLAAF/PLANAF will have in excess of 300 large tactical

fighters with an unrefuelled combat radius of 800 nautical miles, capable of lifting typical warloads comparable to the F-111. This is significant 'throw weight' given that each PGM equipped Flanker equates in 'throw weight' terms to a squadron or more of dumb bomb equipped 1990 Q-5s.

The replacement of legacy H-6 Badger variants with new PGM capable variants sees a tenfold increase in effective fleet 'throw weight' numbers, assuming the future fleet is the same size as the 1990 fleet.

The growth in the throw weight and reach of the PLAAF and PLANAF has been paralleled by the introduction of two types of AEW&C aircraft, the KJ-2000 and KJ-200, both using the same active array technology as Australia's Wedgetail. While these aircraft may lack all of the sophistication of the Wedgetail they will nevertheless provide a robust AEW&C capability. The PLAAF and PLANAF have an existing fleet of H-6U/DU tankers rebuilt from older bombers, and have yet to take delivery of imported Il-78 Midas tankers.

China's investment in AEW&C and tankers has yet to match the established US fleet sizes, but both programs remain active and the PLA have not disclosed to date any intended ceiling in numbers.

China cannot be said to be a 'global peer competitor' to the United States, but given the ongoing strong growth in China's core capabilities in air and naval power, and the decline in US legacy force structure, combined with a broken acquisition system and slow recapitalisation, this presents two convergent trends. At some point in the coming 5 – 15 years, China's core capabilities will numerically match United States capabilities available for expeditionary use in Asia.

The United States is now confronting the strategically unpalatable reality that a decade of COIN campaigns and neglected recapitalisation of legacy fleets has allowed China to close a very large fraction of the huge capability gap the United States enjoyed 20 years ago. With global commitments, the United States must spread its capabilities over a vastly greater footprint than China needs to.

China's investment in modern IADS and hardened airbases presents the reality now that only 130 combat coded F-22A Raptors and 20 combat coded B-2A Spirit bombers can penetrate China's IADS with impunity. The asymmetry in basing

infrastructure affords the PLA the advantage of strategic depth, in terms of having many bases to use, connected by road and rail for replenishment, and around 40 super-hardened underground bases. Conversely, United States forces would have to operate from a small number of unhardened bases, simplifying campaign planning for China in any conflict, as most effort could be focused on crippling a very small number of sites.

China's motives for its massive military buildup have been the subject of much speculation, only recently enlightened by indications that it was driven by a fear of coercion by United States expeditionary forces. This followed the 1996 'Third Taiwan Crisis' when the United States deployed

of which have the capability to stop China from executing blockades and aerial, cruise missile or ballistic missile bombardments of neighbouring territories.

As a result, China's military growth has stimulated an unprecedented reactive arms race across Asia, the principal beneficiary of which has been the Russian military-industrial complex, which has supplied advanced weapons or technology to China, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. The United States have been principal suppliers to Japan, South Korea and Australia. Singapore and South Korea have procured advanced F-15E derivatives to match Chinese Flankers, while India has deployed the advanced Su-30MKI Flanker

H, a variant of which was procured by Malaysia.

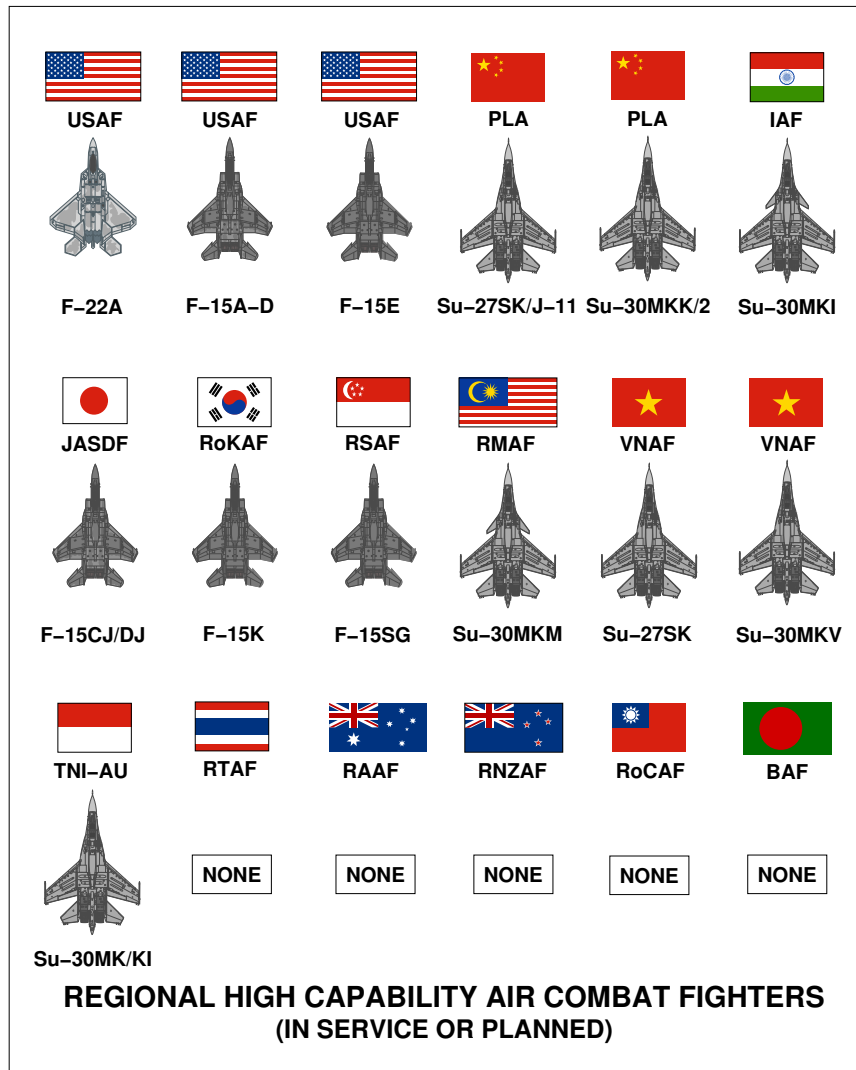
Notable is that AEW&C aircraft have been procured across Asia. Japan operates the E-767 based on the E-3C and the E-2C Hawkeye. India has procured the Israeli Elta EL/W-2090 on the Russian Ilyushin A-50EI airframe, and is developing a smaller indigenous system on the Embraer EMB-145 airframe. Pakistan has deployed the Chinese ZDB-03 on the Y-8 airframe. Singapore has deployed the Israeli EL/W-2085 AEW&C system on the Gulfstream G550 airframe, replacing older E-2C Hawkeyes. South Korea has acquired the E-737 Peace Eye, a variant of the Wedgetail. Thailand has acquired the SAAB 340/Erieye AEW&C system from Sweden, a variant of which has also been ordered by Pakistan. Taiwan operates hybrid E-2B/C Hawkeye hybrids. The only nations without AEW&C in Asia are the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, North Korea and Bangladesh.

Submarines are another capability where China's growth has produced significant reactive effect.

India always operated a robust submarine fleet,

including some leased Russian nuclear powered boats. India currently operates eight Kilo class SSKs, four German Type 209 SSKs, one leased Russian Akula SSN, and one indigenous SSBN, the INS Arihant, first of an intended class of three boats. Six French Scorpene SSKs are on order.

Vietnam has ordered six Type 636 Kilo SSKs. Singapore operates four obsolete Swedish Sjöormen class SSKs and has ordered two newer AIP equipped Kockums Västergötland/Södermanland class SSKs, the forerunner to Australia's Collins class SSKs. Indonesia plans to procure three new SSKs, likely the Type 209 or a derivative. Japan is planning an



2005 chart comparing regional fighter capabilities. Since it was compiled, India has ordered the Russian PAK-FA, and China has developed the J-20, both intended to compete with the F-22. The PAK-FA is to be exported globally to Flanker operators.

two CVBGs into the Taiwan Straits to frustrate Beijing's efforts to intimidate the Taiwanese with ballistic missile tests during a Taiwanese election. The subsequent 1999 airstrike by a B-2A bomber against a Belgrade PRC signals intelligence post during the bombing of Serbia further intensified the Chinese concern.

While the Chinese buildup may have been motivated and internally justified by a belief that it would deter United States interventions in Asia, it has produced an important side effect, which is that China now possesses a significant coercive capability against all of its near neighbours, none

incremental increase from 18 SSKs to 20 boats, five of which are the new AIP equipped Soryu class, and eleven the older Oyashio class SSKs. Malaysia has two Scorpenes on order. South Korea operates three HDW Type 214 SSKs, and nine Type 209s. Taiwan intends to deploy eight SSKs, but the approved purchase has been repeatedly frustrated by Chinese diplomacy - these boats are to replace four obsolescent SSKs.

While a full accounting of the reactive impact across Asia of China's military growth would present as a major study in its own right, what is clear from even a cursory survey of air power and submarine fleets is that the 'baseline' of regional capabilities has increased in a fashion with no precedents in Asia, and is most reminiscent of the three arms races in twentieth century Europe.

CRITICAL TRENDS IN THE ARMS RACE

There is no evidence of any slowing in expenditures, either in China or elsewhere, other than in the United States, following the classical arms race dynamic of spending as much as budgets permit:

Air power is the first key focus in force structure planning, with large long range fighters and AEW&C a key priority for almost all participants.

Submarine fleets are the second key focus, modernising and expanding across Asia;

Surface warship fleets are the third key focus, modernising and expanding across Asia;

Most nations have acquired or are acquiring a wide range of PGMs, including smart bombs and cruise missiles, the latter often deployed from submarines.

AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN THE REGION

If public policy statements and official rhetoric are to be accepted, then the conclusion one might draw is that Australia is in a wonderfully secure position, with a plethora of expensive high technology weapons being procured, a benign neighbourhood, and an always willing all powerful ally in the United States ready to save Australia if a crisis became too big to handle.

This view of Australia's strategic circumstance is perhaps best articulated by its authors. In evidence to the federal Parliamentary inquiry into ADF regional air superiority in 2006, the then Deputy Secretary for Defence Strategy observed in relation to other evidence stating the need for Australia to possess robust air power:

"The scenario—and it is scenario based—that ultimately is embedded in the alternative submission is predicated upon a massive erosion of US military and strategic capability. It is predicated

upon Australia having to operate independently beyond our immediate regions as I have defined them in my earlier remarks. It is predicated upon a radically different set of strategic circumstances which, I must say, I do not necessarily see even in the most speculative parts of my crystal ball."

Six years later the reality is almost exactly that which Australia's highest paid strategy practitioner labelled as something which "I do not necessarily see even in the most speculative parts of my crystal ball."

That the United States was in difficulty was abundantly clear in 2004/05, when it became evident that both Iraq and Afghanistan were becoming very expensive protracted COIN campaigns, and the United States was suffering a problem of 'strategic overstretch' where its resources were simply not large enough for it to sustain its standing force structure, recapitalise its legacy Cold War fleets of equipment, and sustain rotations of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The past five years present an inexorable series of program cancellations, with recapitalisation planning now in disarray, and the result being inevitable shrinkages in key platform fleet sizes – fewer combat aircraft, fewer warships, and fewer heavy land formations.

Concurrently, the United States has had to deal with the fallout of 15 years of unrestrained federal and state borrowing driving national debt to levels comparable to the much publicised EU debt fiasco, while the breakdown of governance in the finance sector produced a crisis resulting from decades of over-lending and 'toxic loans'. The latter was identified by economists in the academic sector as early as 2001, but these warnings were not heeded in the euphoria of the period.

The unhappy consequence is that the United States will be seriously challenged to maintain a credible force structure, given its global commitments, over the coming decades. The notion that the United States is a 'spent power' and of no consequence in the future is an overstatement, but one very popular in Beijing media and widely propagated by ideological opponents of the United States.

What will be true is that the United States will not be able to field the numbers of platforms with relevant and critical capabilities that it did a decade ago, and it is likely that the average age of aircraft, warships and other assets will continue to be high. The side effect this will produce, inevitably, is that the United States will be reluctant to make major commitments to allies, which it regards as having the wherewithal to fend for themselves. This is not the first time the United States has confronted this type of problem – the post-Vietnam drawdown and economic crisis led to the Nixon Doctrine of the

1970s, when allies were actively encouraged to fend for themselves.

For better or worse, Australia will have to deal with two realities in coming decades. The first is that the United States will be challenged to support Australia in most contingencies, and the second that the United States will be challenged to maintain both credible non-nuclear presence and deterrence in Asia.

These circumstances are not without precedent. In 1941 Britain was struggling to survive German air raids and naval blockade, leaving an understrength force structure of mostly obsolete equipment in the critical Singapore garrison. When the United States oil embargo of Japan took effect, Japan moved, and the rest is well known history. The persistent policy of reliance on an overseas ally to perform the "heavy lifting" in provision of military capabilities cost Australia very dearly in lives and resources. On a less critical scale, the 1999 standoff over East Timor did not see significant United States commitments, and Australia was left to do the difficult tasks itself.

The extant Australian policy, modelled on that of the EU NATO nations, of avoiding major force structure planning and investment and relying on the United States to provide such, is not only a high risk strategy, but also a strategically irresponsible and dangerous approach given the circumstances the United States will confront, and the potential for future problems in Asia resulting from two decades of unabating high technology arms race.

The worst case scenario in Asia is a major conflict between China and the United States and its allies. This is often dismissed as impossible, infeasible, unrealistic, or simply as scaremongering. The most popular argument at this time is "Mutually Assured Economic Destruction".

All of these arguments are predicated upon strategically rational political behaviour by all players. History suggests otherwise.

Because of a combination of its single party form of government, weak internal governance and contestability, and a long running campaign of jingoistic nationalism, China is especially vulnerable to problems in strategic decision making, and the risk of resulting strategic miscalculations leading to armed conflict with smaller neighbours. Given the potential for any such actions to escalate quickly into a larger conflict, drawing in other nations and eventually the United States and its allies, the region is clearly entering a period of high strategic risk, on a scale never seen before.

The unavoidable conclusion is that Australia's best choice, and arguably only rational choice, is to return to the policy of military self reliance which was abandoned at the end the Cold War era.

Defence
today
DEFENCE CAPABILITIES & HOMELAND SECURITY

Subscribe now!
www.strikepublications.com.au

published by Strike Publications Pty Ltd - PO Box 27 Amberley Qld 4306 - 07 3282 9019