Conceptualising Future Threats to Australia's Security

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OVERVIEW

Much of the recent Australian security studies literature has focused on contemporary challenges to Australia's role in Asia, the evolving trajectory of defence strategy, and the various factors that have shaped the nation's 'discourse of threats'. While this body of work is important and valuable, there is a distinct lack of scholarship that discusses the types of future security threats likely to confront Australian policy makers in the twenty-first century. Indeed, there is a tendency among scholars to assume that this sort of 'futures' work is best left to those outside the academy. I argue, however, that it is an area which is too important to leave to the authors of defence white papers, think tank reports, and classified strategic assessments. Australia's future security environment in a complex international system has not been subject to the sort of systematic scholarly analysis that the topic merits. This paper seeks to provide a stepping stone for more substantial work in the area, and outlines a conceptual framework that can aid us in understanding the factors likely to impact on Australia's security environment in the early part of the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

Since federating in 1901, Australia has pursued a relatively consistent national security strategy.[1] Protecting the sovereignty of the state has been pursued through the politico-strategic instruments of alliances with great powers and the promotion of a military defence capability aimed at deterring conventional threats from emerging in Asia. This strategy has been supplemented by active bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, which has endeavoured to shape the international environment in favour of Australia's interests. Acutely conscious of Australia's vulnerabilities as a secondary power in a world where major powers typically determine outcomes on key global policy issues, successive governments have sought to promote Australia's capacity to influence its external environment through high level engagement in international institutions and a strong commitment to a rules-based international order. Notwithstanding expressions of sympathy for the concept of human security—which sanctifies the individual as the referent point for security— like their Asian counterparts, successive Australian governments have maintained a decidedly state-centric approach to security.

In a 2008 speech, in which he underscored the role of domestic security threats, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd defined national security as:

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, it is important to distinguish between the generic concept of security (which can be defined as protection from harm) and the concept of *national* security, defined by the author as the protection of a state's sovereignty from external and internal threats.

Freedom from attack or the threat of attack; the maintenance of our territorial integrity; the maintenance of our political sovereignty; the preservation of our hard won freedoms; and the maintenance of our fundamental capacity to advance economic prosperity for all Australians.[2]

The heavily state-based focus of successive Australian governments in the national security arena is in keeping with the broader realist bent underpinning policy makers' perspectives on the international system and Australia's place within it.[3] The enduring sense of historical anxiety about Australia's perceived security vulnerabilities serves both to reinforce and highlight the extent to which Australia's approach to national security is informed by strong pessimism and uncertainty.[4]

To paraphrase Robert Putnam, there remains a degree of 'entanglement' between domestic and international factors in how national security policies are determined in the Australian context.[5] An increasing focus on the domestic dimensions of national security can be traced to the late 1970s when the Fraser government instituted significant changes to the Commonwealth's crisis management machinery, including the creation of the Australian Federal Police in response to the rising profile of

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[2] Rudd, K. 2008. The First National Security Statement to the Australian Parliament, 4 December.

[3] Wesley, M. 2009. 'The Rich Tradition of Australian Realism'. Australian Journal of Politics and History 55(3): 324–34.

[4] Burke, A. 2008. Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety. Cambridge: Canberra University Press.

[5] Putnam, R. 1988. 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games'. *International Organization* 42(3): 427–60.

transnational threats. The terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 sharpened considerably the focus of governments on domestic security, culminating in the Rudd government's *Review of Homeland and Border Security.*[6] However, it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which domestic security considerations shape Australia's broader approach to national security. While placing a greater emphasis on potential domestic threats—an important legacy of the 9/11 attacks—policy makers remain mainly outwardly focused on developing strategies to promote national security. Even those issues often grouped under the 'homeland security' banner, such as home-grown terrorism and border protection, are influenced heavily by broader international forces (e.g. Western military intervention in Muslim states, internally displaced people resulting from conflict). Although some have claimed that the distinction between domestic and international security has become largely redundant in an era of globalisation, Australian governments still routinely distinguish between foreign and domestic issues in calibrating the policies that underpin the nation's security strategy.

A key challenge for Australian policy makers is developing an understanding of the sorts of security threats likely to confront Australia in the years ahead. Typically, this cognitive process involves inferring from past and present trends to produce a prevailingly linear picture of future developments. As one source has noted, this is in keeping with how we tend to think about the future:

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[6] Rudd, K. 2008.

Driven by an inherent desire to bring order to a disorderly, chaotic universe, human beings tend to frame their thoughts about the future in terms of continuities and extrapolations from the present and occasionally the past.[7]

This remains a feature of open source long-range strategic assessments produced by Australian government agencies. For example, in the latest Defence White Paper (a document that focuses on Australia's security environment out to 2030) one of Asia's most significant strategic variables—relations between the major powers—is cast in terms that simply reflect what is already happening:

There are likely to be tensions between the major powers of the region, where the interest of the United States, China, Japan, India and Russia intersect. As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be a possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers.[8]

The topic of threats to Australia's future security is something of a blind spot in the academic literature. In most works on Australian foreign and defence policy, analysis

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[7] USJFC [United States Joint Forces Command]. 2008. *The Joint Operating Environment: Challenges and Implications for the Future Force.* Norfolk, VA: Department of Defense, p. 6.

[8] Department of Defence. 2009. *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030.* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p. 33.

tends to be backward looking and shies away from engaging with potential future developments. As discussed in detail in the main body of this paper, this is partly a result of an aversion by academics to engage in analysis that seeks to define future trends: scholars are, by inclination, sceptical about attempts to chart potential future developments. However, when studying Australia's security circumstances, it makes sense to think seriously about the sorts of developments—including potential external shocks—that will impact on the country's security situation in the years ahead. Like other small and middle powers, Australia's strategic policy remains highly reactive to external events and is acutely influenced by change in the international system.

This paper is concerned with sketching outstanding security threats likely to confront Australia between 2010 and 2025, a fifteen year timeframe that is sufficiently long-range in scope, but not excessively distant as to be meaningless. It is not concerned with the various security *challenges* facing Australia. Threats denote approaching or imminent danger, while challenges imply a demanding situation, not a threatening one. So, for instance, the arrival of illegal refugees in Australia presents a challenge to Australia's border security regime, but it does not constitute a threat, as in the case of a foreign state seeking to compromise Australia's territorial sovereignty. A key contention of the paper is that understanding the nature of change in international relations is a necessary pointer to discussing the types of threats likely to confront Australia over the next one-and-a-half decades. This understanding pertains not to the surface trends in international relations, but instead to the deeper,

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tectonic forces in the international system that will shape Australia's strategic circumstances. A central argument of the paper is that the dominant threats to Australia's security for the foreseeable future will remain state-based in origin and mainly (though not exclusively) a consequence of how the international system evolves. This is particularly the case in Asia, which will be the primary theatre in which long-range threats to Australia's national security materialise. The analysis employs a framework that draws an explicit distinction between trend-based and discontinuity-based markers of change in international relations, and discusses Australia's future security outlook over the next fifteen years within the parameters of this framework.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The performance of international relations scholars in accurately forecasting change in the international system has been fairly unimpressive. The arrival of the nuclear revolution in the 1940s promoted a widely held thesis that wars could never be fought in the shadow of nuclear weapons, given the risk that they would inevitably escalate to nuclear conflict. As it turned out, and despite the absence of world war, the second half of the twentieth century was the most violent period in world history in terms of conventional conflicts. Similarly, widespread predictions of terminal US decline in the post-Vietnam era proved wide of the mark. The advent of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s and the unequivocal reassertion of American power put paid to a range of theories that the US was declining as a great power in the international system. The most notable failure of international relations specialists in

respect to charting change in the international system was the collective failure to forecast the end of the cold war and the subsequent demise of bipolarity. Of course, this failure was not confined to scholarly works: most government agencies shared the common assumption that the Soviet Union would endure as a superpower in spite of the long-standing conviction of most Sovietologists 'that a multiethnic, non-democratic state dependent on a centrally planned economy was inherently unstable.'[9]

As Stanley Hoffmann has observed, part of the problem for international relations specialists is the difficulty of coming to grips with interpreting the very nature of change:

> Because we have an inadequate basis for comparison, we are tempted to exaggerate either continuity with the past that we know badly, or the radical originality of the present, depending on whether we are struck by the features we deem permanent, or with those we do not believe existed before. And yet a more rigorous examination of the past might reveal that what we sense as new really is not, and that some of the 'traditional' features are far more complex than we think.[10]

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[9] Berkowitz, B. 2007. 'US Intelligence Estimates of Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception'. In *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wildcards in World Politics*, ed. F. Fukuyama. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, p. 31.

[10] Hoffmann, S. 1977. 'An American Social Science: International Relations'. *Daedalus* 106(3): 41–60, p. 57.

If anything, scholars have demonstrated a propensity to exaggerate the long term impact of specific changes in international relations. The portrayal of events as epoch changing or transformative has been a recurrent feature of the academic literature. Such characterisations have often been accompanied by claims that international relations is experiencing, or is on the cusp of experiencing, a major break from established patterns of behaviour.

This has been especially apparent in the realm of global governance. In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, many contended that states—great powers in particular—would henceforth be willing to sacrifice narrow national interests in order to make international institutions work for the greater benefit of the international community as a whole. The gradual realisation that the creation of the United Nations Security Council had effectively codified great power hegemony—informed, naturally, by narrow great power national interests—made a significant dent on the early optimism of those who supported the post war liberal international order.[11] In a similar vein, a large body of academic scholarship hailed the end of the cold war as signalling the onset of a new liberal order that would empower the United Nations to finally fulfil the role for which it was intended. Closely related to this was the popular view that, born of enlightenment ideals and following the West's victory over communism, liberalism was irresistibly sweeping across the international

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[11] Kennedy, P. 2007. *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government*. London: Penguin Books.

system and would come to permeate all corners of the globe.[12] Creeping pessimism during the second half of the 1990s resulted from a broader realisation that international relations was still fundamentally business as usual after the cold war, evidenced by continuing great power rivalry, deep ethno-religious conflict in Europe and elsewhere, resilient authoritarianism across Asia, and genocide in parts of Africa.

When we look back at those works that have exaggerated the impact of international change in the modern era, it is apparent they have been informed by a degree of wishful thinking. In an observation that remains highly relevant today, Kal Holsti remarked in 1998 that 'there is a need to discipline the proliferation of claims about novelty, 'new eras', 'new world orders', transformations, and post-this or post-that. One detects in these claims a large component of wishful thought that seems to be replacing serious, empirically-based, and authoritative analysis.'[13] This tendency was evident in much of the academic discourse about globalisation that appeared in the literature in the late 1990s and 2000s. A major theme in much of this scholarship was the predicted decline in significance of the nation-state in international relations, something many activist scholars see as a worthy political objective of itself. Some argued that this would be an inevitable corollary to the rising influence of competing

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[12] Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.

[13] Holsti K. J. 1998. 'The Problem of Change in International Relations Theory'. Institute of International Relations, University of British Columbia, Working Paper no. 26, p. 16.

'social agents', including individuals and non-state actors,[14] while others maintained that 'in the future, a state will be less of a corporate *actor* and constitute more of a decisional *arena* in which various forces meet to resolve national and transnational problems.'[15]

Building on the globalisation literature, in the wake of 9/11 a range of analysts claimed that states' attempts to counter the threat posed by terrorist groups and the rise of other transnational actors would supplant traditional state-based rivalry as the main security arena in international relations.[16] By the turn of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that although the role of non-state actors has become more prominent over time, there is no evidence to conclude that the state has become any less influential in international relations since the end of the cold war. Indeed, in the economic realm, where the influence of states is said to be most tenuous in a globalised world, the recent global financial crisis served to illustrate the power of the state as the financial system's guarantor of last resort. This has prompted one author to herald the triumph of 'state capitalism … a system in which

[14] See: Held, David, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, and J. Perraton. 2004. 'Rethinking Globalisation'. In *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*, eds. D. Held and A. McGrew. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[15] Vayrynen, R. 2001. 'Sovereignty, Globalization and Transnational Social Movements'. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1(1): 227–46, p. 234, emphases added.

[16] see, for instance, Cerny, P. 2004. 'Terrorism and the New Security Dilemma'. *Naval War College Review* 58(1): 10–33; and Bobbitt, P. 2008. *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Allen Lane.

the state functions as the leading economic actor'.[17]

The key to anticipating the future in any realm of international relations is minimising the scope for wishful thinking in analysis. In this sense, liberal and critical theories of international relations—concerned as they are with *promoting* normative change in international relations—are not conducive to balanced, detached judgements about what the future might look like. Moreover, history shows that genuinely significant change in international relations tends to occur over extended periods of time and that sudden, epoch changing events are actually extremely rare—in recent history, the abrupt end of bipolarity caused by the end of the cold war is the exception that proves the rule. Many observers sought to characterise the events of 11 September 2001 as epoch changing, but 9/11 did nothing to alter the systemic makeup and structure of international relations: states remain the dominant units of interaction, systemic anarchy prevails, and the majority of states are still primarily concerned with global and regional balance of power issues, not threats emanating from non-state actors. Excluding an unprecedented radical shift in the international system, it is highly probable that this will endure through to 2025; the question is whether it will be strengthened or attenuated as a consequence of specific developments.

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[17] Bremmer, I. 2009. 'State Capitalism Comes of Age'. Foreign Affairs 88(3): 40–55.

VISUALISING PROSPECTIVE THREATS

Those operating in the domain of strategic analysis are inclined to exaggerate the impact of specific security threats. Threat inflation is a well-known phenomenon and was particularly evident in much of the post-9/11 commentary on the scale and reach of global terrorism. Inflating threats can be a subconscious or conscious cognitive process. There is often a default assumption among individuals that the period of time they inhabit is somehow special or unique historically and that the threats they face are of a magnitude comparable to those confronted by earlier generations. This is evident, for instance, in analysis of the apparent threat from terrorists using weapons of mass destruction against individual cities and the concomitant implication that the threat is tantamount to that of the Cold War period where full-scale nuclear war between the superpowers threatened to engulf most, if not all, regions of the international system.[18] Threat inflation can be self-serving for those in government in helping to justify large national security budget requests.[19] And it can be self-serving for those outside government because big threats help to reinforce the gravity of the analytical endeavour in which they are engaged.

Senior policy makers are themselves not immune to the tendency to exaggerate security threats. As Robert Jervis has observed, policy elites are frequently inclined

[18] for instance, see Allison, G. 2004. *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*. New York: Times Books.

[19] Mueller, J. 2005. 'Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration'. *International Studies Perspectives* 6(2): 208–34.

to perceive 'imaginary dangers' and 'are sensitive to threats to their security that critical observers regard as miniscule.'[20] For leaders in democratic polities, the importance of political risk management in relation to national security can sometimes be all-pervasive; from this perspective, it is better to exaggerate the magnitude of a specific threat (e.g. WMD terrorism) and it not materialise, than to downplay the threat and risk it materialising with the attendant adverse political fallout. This has been a hallmark of Western states' counter-terrorism strategies since 9/11.

In thinking about the future, it is very easy to amplify the gravity of possible threats to security. Put simply, because the future has yet to reveal itself, the scope for speculation is endless. In this sense, it is useful to try to draw a distinction between threats and vulnerabilities. As Barry Buzan points out, this is a difficult task due to the high degree of overlap between the two terms.[21] For instance, states that have weak internal governance structures will be more vulnerable than stronger states to the same threats: a fragile state like Timor-Leste will perceive a greater security threat from domestic criminal activity than a relatively strong state like New Zealand. Similarly, states that are relatively weak in material power terms are more vulnerable to security threats than strong states. For instance, over the next one and half

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[20] Jervis, R. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: pp. 372–73.

[21] Buzan, B. 1991. *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edition. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf: pp. 112–16.

decades Australia will remain more vulnerable than the United States to nuclear blackmail from China, simply because of Australia's relative inferiority in military deterrent capabilities. Yet, given the high level of Sino-Australian economic interdependence, the threat of Beijing seeking to apply such extreme pressure on Australia over the next fifteen years to achieve its policy aims in Asia is negligible (although as I argue in the next section, more subtle forms of pressure from China are entirely plausible). In sum, while policy makers may *feel* vulnerable to a specific future threat, it does not mean that the threat itself is necessarily plausible, or even possible in some cases (see Jervis's point above about 'imaginary dangers').

Formulating a watertight methodology for visualising future security threats to Australia is, by definition, an impossible task. This is not a deficit inherent in the security studies literature; as one author points out, 'quantum physics has conclusively shown that it is in the nature of reality to be unpredictable.'[22] There is no shortage of futures-oriented books that provide scenario-driven 'strategic forecasts' in accessible paperback form, but these are often closer to the fictionalised accounts of writers like Tom Clancy than they are to theoretically informed and empirically grounded social science.[23] The most intellectually coherent body of work produced thus far on future global strategic trends have been studies by the Development,

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[22] Christian, D. 2005. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. Berkeley: University of California Press: p. 467).

[23] See, for example: Friedman, G. 2009. *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Doubleday: New York.

Concepts and Doctrine Centre, a directorate within the UK Ministry of Defence.[24] Highly ambitious in looking out to a three decade time horizon, the analysis contained in the 2007 edition had at its centre the following guidance:

> [T]he future will happen as a result of long wave themes and developments that unite the past, the present and the future. However, one constant in history—the power of contingency and surprise—will continue to dominate our future, which will be influenced and punctuated by unexpected events, startling surprises, major discontinuities and the pervasive operation of chance.[25]

A useful approach to thinking about future developments is to differentiate *trend-based* markers of change from *discontinuity-based* markers of change. The former encompass developments that are essentially linear in orientation. For example, Asia's global rise is an unmistakable trend, but it is one that has been evident since the 1970s. When we assume that the region's ascent will continue into the twenty-first century, we are basing this assessment on an established trend. The US National Intelligence Council's report *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* foreshadows that 'the international system—as constructed following the Second

[24] for the most recent edition, see DCDC [Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre]. 2010. *Global Strategic Trends Out to 2040*, 4th edition, London: Ministry of Defence.

[25] DCDC [Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre]. 2007. *Global Strategic Trends Programme: 2007–2036*. 3rd edition, London: Ministry of Defence, p. v.

World War—will be almost unrecognizable by 2025'.[26] If this does come to pass, it will be the result of a linear process of change that has evolved gradually since the 1940s. Discontinuity-based change, in contrast, denotes a sharp break with an established path of development in international relations. For instance, the Asian economic crisis of 1997–98 was a sudden interruption to a trend-based development (rapid regional economic growth). Interestingly, however, as an instance of discontinuity-based change, the Asian economic crisis did not undermine the broader global rise of Asia.

The following two sections of the paper provide an analysis of the potential security threats likely to confront Australia over the next fifteen years. The first section outlines trend-based threats to Australia's security. That is, threats that are based on current observable trends in international relations and which are likely to remain at the forefront of the global strategic landscape. The second section outlines a range of discontinuity-based threats that could emerge before 2025. These threats would constitute events with the strong potential to alter dramatically Australia's security situation in a seriously negative way. They would represent a development on a scale of the only genuine strategic shock Australia has confronted since Federation: the fall of Singapore in 1941.

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[26] USNIC [US National Intelligence Council]. 2008. *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World.* Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, p. vi.

TREND-BASED THREATS

MAJOR POWER REALIGNMENTS IN ASIA

Of all the developments in Asia, it is the shifting role of the major powers that will determine the region's future security dynamics. In recent years, it has been the rise of China and the relative declining influence of the United States that has been the dominant theme in commentary about major power dynamics in the region. Barring any major internal upheaval in China, this relative shift in Asia's balance of power will continue over the next one-and-a-half decades. While a strong degree of caution should be exercised in assuming US decline in coming years (recall the post-Vietnam propensity to exaggerate America's descent), there can be little doubt that China's ascent, both economically and politically, will continue to challenge America's seven decades of dominance of Asia.

Despite Australia's unprecedented political and economic interaction with China, there is a strong wariness of China's intentions on the part of Australian policy makers. This was a salient theme that permeated Australia's primary strategic planning document of recent times,[27] and is also reflected in surveys of Australian

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[27] Department of Defence. 2009. *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030.* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p. 34.

public opinion.[28] Australia is pursuing a blend of strategies to guard against adverse strategic consequences flowing from its increasing economic dependence on China. Pressure on Australia to accede to China's regional vision in Asia will only intensify in an environment in which China's influence is rising relative to that of the US, and it will become harder for Australia to resist in the context of growing economic intimacy with Beijing. While Australian policy makers are unlikely to act on the advice of Hugh White and 'try to persuade America to relinquish primacy in Asia'[29], they will find it increasingly difficult to avoid accommodating Chinese policy preferences on key security issues in order to maintain an upward trajectory in the economic relationship, particularly given that this has already occurred over the Taiwan issue (in 2004) and the Quadrilateral Dialogue process (in 2008).[30]

CONTINUING DEMAND FOR NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Notwithstanding the view in some quarters that the long term prospects for nuclear disarmament have never been better, demand for nuclear weapons across the international system remains buoyant. Nuclear weapons exercise a particularly strong attraction for those states that perceive threats from countries possessing markedly stronger conventional military capabilities. Acquiring nuclear weapons (or,

[28] most recently, see Hanson, F. 2010. *Australia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, pp. 9–11.

[29] White, H. 2010. 'Power Shift: Australia's Future Between Washington and Beijing', *Quarterly Essay*, 39, pp. 55–6.

[30] See Manicom, J. and A. O'Neil. 2010. 'Accommodation, Realignment, Or Business As Usual? Australia's Response to a Rising China'. *The Pacific Review* 23(1): 23–44.

at the very least, a threshold operational capability) makes strategic sense from the perspective of some states because of their perceived asymmetric utility against conventionally stronger adversaries and the enhanced political influence they confer internationally. This is particularly apposite for an economically weak state like North Korea, which would have little influence regionally or deterrent clout against its perceived adversaries if it did not possess nuclear weapons. The so-called nuclear renaissance raises concern that countries building new nuclear facilities will seek to exploit these in the future for military as well as civilian purposes.[31]

From Australia's perspective, continuing demand for nuclear weapons poses a real threat to national security. Asia is especially vulnerable to nuclear proliferation pressures in the twenty-first century, and is projected to account for the lion's share of global nuclear energy expansion. Moreover, compared with other regions in the international system, the effectiveness of the non-proliferation regime in this part of the world has been patchy, at best. Asia is home to four declared nuclear weapons states (China, India, North Korea, and Pakistan), but is also home to another group of countries (Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia) that retain proficiency in nuclear fuel cycle technologies and a historical track record of voicing sympathy for the option of acquiring nuclear weapons. An increase in the number of states possessing nuclear weapons capability in Asia would further complicate Australia's strategic environment. If this was accompanied by a gradual loss of

[31] Fuhrmann, M. 2009. 'Spreading Temptation: Proliferation and Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreements'. *International Security* 34(1): 7–41.

confidence in the credibility of extended deterrence guarantees—either nuclear or conventional or both—from the US, Australia would find itself increasingly vulnerable to existential threats to its vital sovereign interests.

ENERGY RISKS

Like every other country in the international system, securing key energy supplies is a central long term objective in Australia's national strategy. While essentially self-sufficient in the energy required to service national demand, Australia is likely to confront a degree of longer term scarcity in the area of oil and petroleum products. This is important because just over half of all the energy Australia consumes is in the form of oil and petroleum products. It is widely estimated that Australia's self-sufficiency in these products will decline markedly over the next two decades as domestic sources are depleted.[32] There is an assumption that Australia will maintain its access to well-functioning oil markets into the future, but the most recent report from the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism suggests that Australia could become acutely susceptible to sector shocks by 2023 'if global investment in production capacity does not, at a minimum, keep pace with [worldwide] demand growth'.[33]

Australia presently accesses the overwhelming majority of its oil and petroleum

[32] Leaver, R. 2007. 'Australia and Asia-Pacific Energy Security: The Rhymes of History'. In *Energy Security in Asia*, ed. M. Wesley. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 100–2.

[33] DRET [Department of Resources Energy and Tourism]. 2009. *National Energy Security Assessment: 2009*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p. 13.

products from Asia, and is particularly reliant on Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia for imports. These suppliers are relatively stable politically, and the distances and routes over which supplies travel are fairly secure. Yet, as the economies of these suppliers continue to grow, they will consume a greater proportion of their own oil and petroleum products and gradually reduce the amount of supplies they export. As Michael Wesley has pointed out, this means that Australia will become gradually more dependent on importing oil and petroleum products from the Middle East where supply is plentiful, but the political stability of key suppliers remains in question.[34] Supply routes from this region also remain at risk of serious disruption. Rising dependence on the Middle East market in the years ahead could present a major threat to Australia's energy security as 2025 draws closer.

ISLAMIST-INSPIRED TERRORISM

Since 9/11 and the 2002 Bali attacks, the threat of attacks from Islamist-inspired terrorism has loomed large in Australia's national security discourse. While some observers argue that the threat of terrorist attack against Australian targets has been exaggerated, there remains a widespread expectation that Australian governments will do everything within their power to protect Australian citizens from terrorism, both domestically and abroad. The risk of Australians being killed or injured in a terrorist attack overseas is much higher than the risk of Australian casualties resulting from a

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[34] Wesley, M. 2007. *Power Plays: Energy and Australia's Security*. Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, pp. 25–26.

domestic attack. That said, the adverse impact on perceptions of national security would be far greater if a large-scale attack was successfully carried out on Australian shores against a major urban target. The demands on government to prevent further attack would be extreme. The impact would multiply exponentially if the attack involved the use of a weapon of mass destruction, especially a nuclear device. In such circumstances, the effect on Australia's sense of existential security would be profound. Despite the absence of genuinely large-scale attacks on Western targets since September 2001, and the extensive counter-terrorist initiatives undertaken by Australian authorities, the threat of small and mass casualty events resulting from Islamist–inspired terrorism will persist.

Australia's *response* to a specific terrorist attack would have a major bearing on the extent to which the physical assault itself has a long term impact on national security. A major attack on an Australian city on the scale of the Bali attack in 2002 would dramatically lower the threshold of public resistance to governments introducing more draconian anti-terrorism laws than those already passed since 2001, encompassing greater formal powers for police and security agencies. In a highly charged post-attack climate, there would be fewer demands on governments to justify new legislation from a civil liberties standpoint or to subject such legislation to detailed and transparent scrutiny.[35] If the attack was planned and undertaken by an

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[35] O'Neil, A. 2007. 'Degrading and Managing Risk: Assessing Australia's Counter-terrorist Strategy'. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42(3): 471–87.

Australian citizen—a real probability given trends of recent years in other Western countries—the backlash against Australia's Muslim community would be intense and unprecedented. Ensuring that the civil rights of an ethnic-religious minority group are safeguarded would be a key task for government in an environment in which popular pressure would increase for initiatives such as explicit ethnic profiling and easier detention of possible terrorists. The pressure on government, opposition parties, the media, and senior community leaders to follow public opinion could well prove irresistible in such a highly charged climate.

DISCONTINUITY-BASED THREATS

MAJOR POWER CONFRONTATION AND CONFLICT IN ASIA

Historically, confrontation and conflict between major powers has occurred during periods in which shifts in the balance of power take place. In his book *The Origins of Major War*, Dale Copeland argues that hitherto dominant states which perceive they are in decline relative to a regional rival are likely to initiate preventive war against that rival in order to forestall a terminal shift in the balance of power.[36] It would be foolhardy to draw parallels between the US-Soviet and the US-China relationship. The latter is more multilayered than many acknowledge, and its strong economic

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[36] Copeland, D. 2000. *The Origins of Major War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

dimension distinguishes it from the rather narrow ideological-military rivalry between the US and the USSR. Confrontation and conflict between Washington and Beijing would clearly constitute a strategic shock in Asia, and such a scenario is distinctly plausible. Hyper-nationalist forces in both countries—residing predominantly in the right-wing of the Republican Party and within conservative elements of the PLA—see some sort of conflict as inevitable, and it is very likely that their influence over national policy would increase in the event that the bilateral relationship deteriorated.

This is particularly so when we consider the range of triggers that could precipitate confrontation between China and the United States in Asia. A standoff over Taiwan has frequently been identified as the most likely trigger, along with naval confrontation in relation to maritime territorial disputes in the region, including those over the South China Sea. But bilateral tensions could quickly escalate over Korean peninsula issues. China sees North Korea as an indispensable geostrategic buffer, and would be willing to use force against any state that sought to 'interfere' in the DPRK's internal affairs should the regime in Pyongyang collapse, or find itself near the verge of collapse. For its part, Washington (along with Tokyo and Seoul) would find it very difficult *not* to intervene in some form in such circumstances given North Korea's active nuclear weapons program and concerns about which entity or entities would assume command and control of these assets in a post-Kim Jong-il environment. It is likely that Washington and Beijing would interpret any crisis as a broader test of wills about their place in the future regional order in Asia. This would make any crisis highly combustible and introduce a dangerous new dynamic into

Asian regional security.

THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

A number of prominent analysts have attributed the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945 to the existence of a so-called 'nuclear taboo', which is a combination of self-interest (no state wants to deal with the negative effects of potential reprisal and large-scale reputational costs) and genuine 'normative considerations about what constitutes responsible state behaviour'.[37] However, it is equally likely that non-use has also been due to a solid dose of good luck: there were a number of documented near-misses during the cold war that could have led to nuclear deployment, either deliberately by decision makers or by accident. With nine nuclear weapons states in the international system in 2010—emerging at an average rate of almost one-and-a-half new nuclear weapons states per decade over the past sixty-five years—there is a high probability that at least two new nuclear weapons states will emerge before 2025. The obvious corollary of this is an increase in the mathematical probability of nuclear weapons use, by design or by accident. This is even before taking into account the great unknown of whether a terrorist organisation will be in a position to access and deliver a nuclear device.

The costs for Australia resulting from even the most limited use of nuclear weapons

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[37] Potter, W. 2010. 'In Search of the Nuclear Taboo: Past, Present, and Future'. *IFR*, p. 11.

by a state or a non-state actor anywhere in the world would be significant. They would be especially severe if it occurred in Asia, where most of Australia's economic, political, and strategic interests intersect. The likely implications of a nuclear exchange—widespread destruction of social well-being, massive economic dislocation, and the potential devastation of regional order—would have enduringly negative consequences for Australia's national security. More generally, the longer term implications of nuclear use would be fundamental. From a non-proliferation and disarmament perspective, the evident horror of nuclear use could trigger genuine revulsion worldwide and serve to accelerate nuclear disarmament initiatives. A greater likelihood, however, is that the demonstrated mass destructive effects of a nuclear device would push states further in the direction of acquiring an operational, or least a threshold, nuclear weapons capability and stymie progress towards disarmament.[38] Such an environment would be deleterious to Australia's strategic outlook, particularly if it led to greater proliferation in Asia.

THE RISE OF NEO-ISOLATIONISM IN THE US

It might seem counter-intuitive to seriously contemplate America retreating into isolationism, given its ambitious post-cold war reengagement with the world, but the advent of neo-isolationism in the United States remains a real prospect over the next fifteen years. The impulse to disengage from the demands and rigours that are part

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[38] For discussion, see Quester, G. 2006. *Nuclear First Strike: Consequences of a Broken Taboo.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

and parcel of global primacy has surfaced in US foreign policy debates since the end of the cold war. A number of Democratic and Republican members of Congress advocated the retrenchment of the US global military presence in the early 1990s, which stirred fears in Asia that Washington would pull back from its strategic commitments in the region. Such views were rejected by the Bush-Clinton-Bush administrations, and the enlargement of US global strategy after 9/11 appeared to have settled the matter. Yet, isolationism has a long and persistent tradition in American foreign policy debates that can be traced back to 1776. Indeed, historically speaking, isolationism has been the norm rather than the exception in US foreign policy. The events of 9/11 spurred a highly nationalistic response in the US polity that resulted in a reassertion of America's global role, but a future catastrophic attack on the continental US could very well trigger a highly nationalistic response that is insular instead of outward looking and which endorses the view that the price to be paid for global primacy is excessively high.

As Thomas Barnett notes, twenty-first century isolationism in the United States 'does not argue so much for pulling our military forces home as positioning them as a sort of global border patrol' to prevent direct threats against the continental United States.[39] If such a view evolved into policy, the United States would pull back from a direct strategic presence in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and adopt a minimal

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[39] Barnett T. 2004. The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century. New York: G. B. Putnam's Sons, p. 160.

military footprint in these regions that would probably be confined to a naval presence aimed at safeguarding critical sea lines of communication. Washington would still be engaged economically with the rest of the world—it has little choice in the age of globalisation—but it would be focused on protecting *national* security as distinct from pursuing *global* security. Given that much of its strategic policy is predicated on the US continuing to play a global role, this would have serious consequences for Australia. Washington's role as the indispensable great power balancer in Asia, coupled with 'the stable and reliable sense of assurance' provided by extended deterrence,[40] means that Australia would react very negatively to any retreat by the US into neo-isolationism. While the United States could still fulfil an extended nuclear deterrence role in Australia's national security strategy, the Obama administration's recent decision to place explicit caveats on the circumstances in which Washington would employ, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons suggests some doubt about whether the United States will continue to extend its nuclear deterrent to Australia in an era in which it is raising the barriers to nuclear use.[41]

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[40] Department of Defence. 2009. *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030.* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, p. 50.

[41] In its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the Obama administration formally committed the United States 'not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations'. See US DoD (2010, viii).

EXPONENTIAL CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

The potential security implications of climate change are significant and wide ranging, and are evident at two levels. The first is the actual impact on individuals within states of disruptions in their geophysical environment. Water shortages caused by declining rainfall patterns in some states, shortfalls in food distribution caused by poor crop yields, and more frequent infectious disease outbreaks triggered by increasing rainfall and rising humidity in some areas are examples of how climate change can have a deleterious impact on human security.[42] The second level at which the security implications of climate change are evident is the impact on states and how they interact in the international system. The risk of conflict between countries will increase as they seek to secure what they see as a necessary and reasonable share of resources to fuel their economic growth, which for some states will become increasingly scarce as climate change begins to bite in earnest. The potential for interstate conflict will be further exacerbated by the rapid and large-scale movement of people from areas experiencing the worst effects of climate change (most of the developing world) to less affected areas (most of the developed world).

If climate change proceeds at its current rate—and there are few grounds to suggest that it will not—it will present an ongoing security challenge for Australian

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[42] Garnaut, R. 2008. *The Garnaut Climate Change Review Final Report*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 75–104.

governments in the period to 2025. As Alan Dupont points out, 'on four out of five previous occasions of mass extinction in the Earth's history, at least half of all animal and plant species are estimated to have been wiped out during periods of warming that are comparable to those in prospect'.[43] If, however, climate change accelerates rapidly over the next decade and a half, Australia could find itself confronting a daunting threat to its national security. A number of studies have canvassed the possibility of exponential climate change—that is, a situation in which the speed and extent of increases in temperature are far greater than expected and/or where adverse trends accelerate dramatically. According to projections from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an abrupt acceleration could be manifested 'in temperature rises over the next thirty years to 2.6 degrees centigrade above 1990 levels, with larger warming over land and at high altitudes'.[44] Such dramatic shifts have historical precedent. Climate researchers have identified abrupt climate change as triggering the end of the last Ice Age, where global temperatures increased by five degrees centigrade over the space of a decade,[45] with cataclysmic consequences for humankind.

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[43] Dupont, A. 2008. 'The Strategic Implications of Climate Change'. *Survival* 50(3): 29–54, p. 47.

[44] Fuerth, L. 2008. 'Security Implications of Climate Change Scenario 2: Severe Climate Change Over the Next Thirty Years'. In *Climatic Cataclysm: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Climate Change*, ed. K. Campbell. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, p. 134.

[45] DCDC [Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre]. 2007. *Global Strategic Trends Programme: 2007–2036*. 3rd edition, London: Ministry of Defence, pp. 78–9.

CONCLUSION

The overriding theme of this paper is that analytical discussion of security futures for Australia is too important to be left to governments and security oriented think tanks. While contributions from these sources are valuable (in the case of governments, necessary), scholars have a major role to play in the area. This is less in relation to the empirical nuts and bolts of strategic trends, and more in terms of developing rigorous frameworks for conceptualising prospective threats to Australia's security. These frameworks must, by definition, embrace certain theoretical assumptions about how the world works, Australia's place within it, and the distinction between threats to security and security vulnerabilities. In this paper I have sought to provide a stepping stone for more substantial work in the area by outlining a framework that distinguishes what I term 'trend-based threats' from 'discontinuity-based threats' in thinking about plausible future threats to Australia's national security over the next fifteen years.

The two sections of this paper that address trend-based threats and discontinuity based threats are by no means intended to be exhaustive in scope. Several specific security threats could have been added to both categories, including a mass influenza pandemic, the collapse of North Korea (and possibly China), and a return to authoritarianism in Indonesia. Yet it is equally important to emphasise that the security threat snapshots outlined above have not been selected at random. The variable of probability remains an important consideration in selecting specific security threats. There are innumerable *possible* security threats in the international

system, and some may emerge domestically, but they are too frequently conflated with those that are probable. Also important is the depth and breadth of impact such threats will have on Australia's security situation. For instance, the collapse of democracy and a return to authoritarianism in Indonesia may arguably be more probable than the advent of neo-isolationism in the United States, but the latter would have a decisively greater impact on Australia's security outlook, in the short and longer term. Similarly, some may judge a mass influenza pandemic to be more likely than exponential climate change impacts, but the security threat posed by the latter would be far greater for Australia (and, for that matter, the world) than the former.[46]

Writing in 2005, Alan Gyngell observed that

> as a sparsely settled continent on the edge of Asia, dependent on global markets for its prosperity and on distant allies for its security, Australia has faced as the central question of its foreign policy not whether it should engage actively with the world, but how it should do so.[47]

Australia remains an active secondary power in the international system, but it is not a major player globally, and the tools it has at its disposal to protect national interests

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[46] For a thoughtful analysis of the implications for security of a global influenza pandemic, see Enemark (2006).

[47] Gyngell, A. 'Australia's Emerging Global Role'. *Current History* 104(680): 99–104, p. 99.

are limited. As much as it may grate with notions of sovereign destiny and self-reliance, Australia's security situation will continue to be determined overwhelmingly by events and processes largely beyond the control of national policy makers. This has proven to be an important lesson since Federation, and will no doubt reinforce caution, hope, and pessimism in equal measure among those charged with navigating Australia's engagement with the outside world in the twenty-first century.

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