

# SPECIAL REPORT

A S P I

How the geopolitical partnership between China and Russia threatens the West



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# How the geopolitical partnership between China and Russia threatens the West



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We're in an era when the risks of major-power conflict are growing. The most likely contenders are China, the rising power, and the US, the formerly dominant power that's now in relative decline. The other worrying contingency is conflict between Russia and US-led NATO. But what about the third possibility: the prospect of China and Russia collaborating to challenge American power? The most dangerous scenario for America would be a grand coalition of China and Russia united not by ideology, but by complementary grievances.

China and Russia are the two leading revisionist powers leagued together in their disdain for the West. Both these authoritarian states see a West that they believe is preoccupied with debilitating political challenges at home. Putin has contempt for what he sees as a Europe that's weak and divided. Xi Jinping believes that China is well on its way to becoming the predominant Asian power, possessing a successful model of political and economic development superior to that of the West. China and Russia have commonly perceived threats with regard to the West and are now sharing an increasingly close strategic relationship. If the China–Russia military partnership continues its upward trend, that will inevitably affect the international security order, including by challenging the system of US-centred alliances in the Asia–Pacific and Europe.

So, what are the chances of Beijing and Moscow concluding that now's the time to challenge the West and take advantage of what they both consider to be Western weaknesses? They're well aware of the military power of the US, but they both know that the US no longer enjoys uncontested military superiority everywhere.

Recognising this, it may be that the time has come when Beijing and Moscow test Washington's mettle and see whether they can successfully challenge the US in both the European and Asian theatres. China and Russia may even come to the view that they could regain lost territories—such as Taiwan and Ukraine. Both have recently used incremental territorial claims to their advantage and without any direct challenge from the West.

Russia and China are increasingly joining forces in the international arena to balance against America, and their militaries are becoming much closer. Recently, the partnership has deepened to provide for advanced Russian military equipment sales to China, as well as joint military exercises in the Baltic and East China seas. Evidence is now accumulating to suggest that Russia's relationship with China is deepening quite rapidly and is now much closer than ever before.

Both China and Russia are now allied in a quest to refashion a world order that's safe for their respective authoritarian systems. Both their leaders have reasons to be gratified by global trends and the fact that they're 'out-gaming' the West. Beijing and Moscow probably believe that now is a time of great strategic opportunity, with the Western alliance in disarray.

The rapid development of China's military capability, together with serious reforms in Russia's military forces, is occurring at a time when America can't fight two major regional conflicts simultaneously. America's obsession with looking inward and 'making America great again' opens fresh geopolitical opportunities for China and Russia.

America aims to maintain favourable regional balances of power in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe. But that will be a particularly challenging task, given China's rising power in Asia and Russia's flexing of its military muscles in Europe and the Middle East.

None of this is to argue that China and Russia are creating a formal security alliance. Instead, what we're seeing is a great-power coalition that reflects the deepening geopolitical prospects now available to Beijing and Moscow.

The implications for Australia relate not only to the dangers of armed conflict involving China and Russia against the West; some conflicts might involve Australia more directly. Moreover, Russia's supply of advanced weapons to China threatens to undermine the Australian Defence Force's traditional technological advantage in our region. And the growing presence of China and Russia in our region of primary strategic interest must be a matter for concern.

# INTRODUCTION

It's become commonplace to accept that we're in an era when the risks of major-power conflict are growing. The most likely contenders are seen to be China, the rising power, and the US, the formerly dominant power now in relative decline. The other worrying contingency is military conflict between Russia and the US. But what about the third possibility: the prospect of China and Russia collaborating to challenge American military power? Zbigniew Brzezinski warned that the most dangerous scenario for America would be a grand coalition of China and Russia united not by ideology but by complementary grievances.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Graham Allison and Dimitri Simes wrote about a functional military alliance between China and Russia now becoming a geostrategic fact as they draw closer together to meet what each sees as 'the American threat'.<sup>2</sup> And Robert Kaplan observes that the bonding of China and Russia is a result of 'the most fundamental, slow-moving geopolitical damage caused by President Trump's foreign policy'.<sup>3</sup>

China and Russia are the two leading revisionist powers leagued together in their disdain for the West. Both these authoritarian states see a West that they believe is weak and preoccupied with debilitating political challenges at home. Putin has contempt for what he sees as the end of liberal democracy in a Europe that's weak, divided, and bereft of values and morality. Xi Jinping believes that China is well on its way to becoming the predominant Asian power, possessing an alternative and more successful model of political and economic development to that of the West.

China and Russia have commonly perceived threats and they're starting to share an increasingly close relationship, including militarily and technologically. If the China–Russia military partnership continues its upward trend, it will inevitably affect the international security order, including by challenging the system of US-centred alliances in Europe and the Asia–Pacific. The US Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, told a US Senate committee in January 2019:

China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year ... As China and Russia seek to expand their global influence, they are eroding once well-established security norms and increasing the risk of regional conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to argue that we're going to see a formal Russo-Chinese alliance. But what we're observing is an ever-closer friendship of convenience: Russia and China are economically complementary; they're both secure continental nuclear powers; and they're both the dominant military powers in their own immediate regions. In their different ways, they're probably coming to see that the West's current disarray favours them geopolitically.

So, what are the chances of Beijing and Moscow concluding that now is the time to challenge the West militarily and take advantage of what they both consider to be Western weaknesses? China and Russia are well aware of the impressive military capabilities of the US, but they both also know that the US no longer enjoys uncontested or dominant military superiority everywhere and that America can't fight two major regional wars simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> Recognising this, it may be that the time has come when Beijing and Moscow will contemplate testing America's mettle and seeing whether they can successfully challenge the US in both the European and Asian theatres at the

same time. China and Russia may even come to decide that they could regain lost territories in such places as Taiwan and Ukraine. Beijing and Moscow perceive both those places as central to what they see as their rightful historical and cultural claims as great powers.

This paper examines Russian and Chinese concepts of great-power war in the 21st century, their views of the West and its military capabilities, and what risks they might both take to regain lost territories. The paper concludes by examining how America might react, the implications of all this for the West, including Australia, and what sort of armed conflict might be involved.

# CONCEPTS OF GREAT-POWER WAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The general idea that great powers go to war has faded from contemporary memory because the last great-power war was World War II, three-quarters of a century ago. Since then, we've observed major powers involved in limited conflicts in the Korean peninsula, Vietnam and places such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Only one of those—the Korean War—has involved great powers fighting each other on opposing sides. In the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union never encountered each other directly in armed conflict. The two major nuclear crises in 1962 and 1983 were arguably highly dangerous, but one-on-one military conflict never occurred. In the post-Cold War era since 1991, there's been no major power with the global reach to challenge US supremacy. For the past three decades, the US could generally deploy its forces when it wanted, assemble them where it wanted, and operate them how it wanted.<sup>6</sup>

Now, however, the US sees long-term inter-state strategic competition with China and Russia as its primary national security concern. Washington's *2018 National Defense Strategy* asserts that it's increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape the world consistent with their authoritarian model. China is identified as pursuing 'a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future'.<sup>7</sup> Russia is described as seeking 'veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security structures in its favour'.<sup>8</sup> The US strategy document goes on to say that Russia's use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, 'but when coupled with its expanding and modernizing nuclear arsenal the challenge is clear'.<sup>9</sup>

These words mark a fundamental change in US defence strategy. Inter-state strategic competition, and not the previous preoccupation with terrorism, is identified as the primary concern of US national security. The Indo-Pacific region and Europe are now placed ahead of the Middle East and the Western hemisphere as areas where the US needs to maintain favourable regional balances of power and defeat aggression by a major power.<sup>10</sup> These key policy directives have sent important messages to America's allies about Washington's radical new strategic direction. Washington is now giving priority to great-power competition.

In addition to renewed worries about the military threat from major powers, it needs to be recognised that there are new threats short of conventional, or indeed nuclear, conflict. The use of new methods of disruption short of open warfare—such as information warfare, ambiguous or denied proxy operations, and subversion, as well as cyberattacks on key civilian infrastructure—reflects an important shift in the 21st-century way of going to war.

The Chief of the Australian Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, recognised this in an important speech to the ASPI 2019 annual conference, 'War in 2025'. Campbell made the very telling point that a new, modernised version of political warfare may have already begun, as totalitarian ('authoritarian' is more accurate) powers unrestrained by rules are willing to use information campaigns, cyber operations, thefts of intellectual property, coercion and propaganda to weaken Western democracies. He described these as 'grey-zone operations' that subvert, erode and undermine, breaking international rules and norms, but, in the eyes of the targeted state, fall short of requiring

a military response. Campbell said that such regimes tend to have a much broader conception of war, and he noted that they are better able to harness political warfare in a more controlled way than the West.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, war in the contemporary era can occur not just when kinetic violence is unleashed. It will be difficult for Western democracies to know when countries such as China and Russia have already mounted offensive operations and when this new, modernised version of political warfare may have begun.

China and Russia are well versed in using these sorts of grey-zone operations. China is using coercion as a means of getting its own way strategically—particularly in what it sees as its natural sphere of influence in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In the South China Sea, Beijing has deliberately used its growing military power to coerce rival Southeast Asian claimants into effectively accepting its so-called legitimate territorial claims. And Xi Jinping has renewed China's threat of the use of military power to reclaim Taiwan as its own. At the time of writing, it remains to be seen whether Beijing will use military force in a Hong Kong that's experienced five months of violent protests against the China-backed local authorities.

In the case of Russia, it's used deniable 'little green men' to seize territory in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, as well as to occupy the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia adjoining Georgia. Both Beijing and Moscow have shown themselves to be adept at using cyberattacks, black propaganda and infiltration to interfere in the domestic policies (and elections) of democratic countries. We might see such black arts, which are short of armed conflict, widely deployed in future as precursors to the use—or threatened use—of military force.

At the same time, China is rapidly developing a modern military force capable of fighting and winning regional conflicts against 'strong military opponents' in what it calls 'informationized war' defined by real-time, data-networked command and control and precision strike capabilities aimed at information dominance early in a conflict.<sup>12</sup> This modernisation aligns with China's growing emphasis on the maritime domain and increasing demands on its navy to conduct operational tasks at expanding distances from the Chinese mainland.<sup>13</sup> China is pursuing an ambitious military build-up program, including of conventional precision strike capabilities for use in large-scale theatre campaigns. Beijing aims to complete China's military modernisation by 2035 and make the People's Liberation Army into a 'world-class' military by 2049.<sup>14</sup> According to the Pentagon, China's commingling of some of its conventional and nuclear missile forces, and ambiguities in China's no-first-use conditions, could complicate deterrence and escalation management during a conflict: 'China's leadership calculus for responding to conventional attacks on nuclear forces remains a key unknown.'<sup>15</sup>

Russia, too, has modernised its conventional forces and plans an ambitious program of modernising its strategic nuclear triad. Russia's military forces did not perform well in Georgia in 2008. Since then, however, there have been far-reaching defence reforms, which we've seen being used since March 2014 in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria. Russia's armed forces now can react quickly and strike without warning, especially in what it terms its 'near abroad'. Russia is now a military power that could overwhelm any of its neighbours if they were isolated from Western support.<sup>16</sup> Russian operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine featured elements of counterinsurgency, war among the people, opacity of the identity and affiliation of participants, and an unclear chain of command. NATO's former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Philip Breedlove, described the Russian operations as 'a 21st-century offensive that builds on Soviet and Russian traditions but that incorporates new thinking and 21st-century tools'.<sup>17</sup> Keir Giles argues that Moscow has successfully integrated a new concept of limited intervention and information warfare so as to bring recalcitrant neighbours to heel.<sup>18</sup>

Others go much further than this: they talk about a coming war between Russia and the US and are more concerned about the drift of events than at any point since the end of World War II.<sup>19</sup> This brings us to the crucial issue of Russia's new emphasis, since 2014, on the potential use of nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup> Russia's thinking on nuclear warfare has become increasingly permissive. The most worrying trend is the discussion of the 'de-escalatory' use of tactical nuclear weapons, which is a concept revolving around using an early limited nuclear strike to deter massive NATO conventional intervention. The idea behind this is that Russia would seize control of the war escalation process by detonating a first strike in a preventive or pre-emptive mode. This would force NATO to negotiate a political solution

that allows Russia to hold onto its territorial gains in the event of an invasion, for example, of one of the Baltic states.<sup>21</sup> Putin's statement that he was ready to put nuclear weapons on stand-by during the occupation of Crimea suggests that the concept of Russia's use of tactical nuclear weapons must be taken seriously.<sup>22</sup>

Russia's publicly stated policy reserves the right to potentially use nuclear weapons in response to large-scale conventional aggression 'when the state's very existence has been threatened'.<sup>23</sup> However, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* observes that Moscow seems to be administering that strategy more offensively than it once did.<sup>24</sup> Russian officials have made many statements about nuclear weapons that appear to go beyond the published doctrine, threatening to potentially use them, for example, against ballistic missile defence facilities and in regional scenarios that don't threaten Russia's survival. The fact that Russian military planners are pursuing a broad range of existing and new versions of non-strategic nuclear weapons suggests that the real doctrine goes beyond basic deterrence and towards regional war-fighting strategies.<sup>25</sup>

# HOW CHINA AND RUSSIA VIEW THE WEST

In an ASPI publication in 2016, I observed that we live in an era when geopolitics is reasserting its place in the global order.<sup>26</sup> I argued that great-power revisionism has now returned, and two great authoritarian powers, China and Russia, are fundamentally challenging the established international order. Both coercion and the use or threatened use of military power are back in vogue, together with the modernised version of political or hybrid warfare. Russia is seeking to carve out a sphere of influence in what it terms its ‘near abroad’ in Europe, and China is using coercion in the South and East China seas to assert its rising great-power status. Russia and China are leagued together in their rejection of what they see as US hegemony and their view that the West has imposed on them the current international order, which must now be rewritten in their favour. We’re now seeing an emerging confrontation between two new power blocs: the authoritarian continental powers of China and Russia and the Western democratic maritime states led by America.

In the past three years, the attitudes of both China and Russia towards the West have hardened further. China seems to be confident that what President Xi calls the ‘Chinese Dream’ of revitalising the country through ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ can now be achieved.<sup>27</sup> The 19th Party Congress report in 2018 by Xi identified the period from 2035 to 2050 as the next stage in China’s economic growth, in which it will become a prosperous, modern and strong socialist country with a ‘world-class’ military, presumably to be recognised as a peer competitor of the US.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, China sees its development as a potential model for other countries to follow, claiming the international community should view China’s methods as unthreatening and constructive. We need to understand that Beijing is seeking to proselytise its authoritarian state-capitalist regime as a superior model for developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to follow. This is not copying the Soviet Union’s attempts to export crude communist ideology: it’s a much more sophisticated—and appealing—approach to countering the Western democratic model. As State Councillor Yang Jiechi wrote in July 2017: ‘We should share our governance experience with other countries.’<sup>29</sup>

In the initial two decades of the 21st century, China’s leaders have benefited from what they view as a ‘period of strategic opportunity’ to facilitate domestic economic development and expand China’s ‘comprehensive national power’. They’re now focused on realising a powerful China on the international stage whose status as a great power will ultimately see it emerge as the pre-eminent power in the Indo-Pacific region. To that end, Beijing has proposed two important concepts to establish its regional pre-eminence and expand its international influence. The first is the concept of a ‘new type of major power relations’, which attempts to frame bilateral ties with the US as a peer relationship; the second is the ‘new regional security concept’ for the Asia-Pacific region, which seeks to establish regional security cooperation without US alliances—which Beijing portrays as an outmoded Cold War approach to creating military blocs. Beijing proposes instead a new model of defence cooperation based on partnerships, albeit with China the pre-eminent state or ‘big power’. China continues to advocate the construction of a ‘community of common destiny’ (whatever that means) while stressing that it will defend core territorial interests and that it isn’t afraid to respond militarily to provocations.<sup>30</sup>

All of this reflects an increasingly confident China, the leadership of which has a strong belief in China's destiny and that—at least for now—time is on its side. China is unhappy with the current international security governance architecture and has the political determination under Xi to restructure it in a new direction. It aims to do so with the help of countries that aren't part of the US-led alliance system, and especially Russia.<sup>31</sup>

Russia and China are increasingly joining forces in the international arena to balance against America, and bilaterally their militaries are becoming much closer, as the Chinese Minister of National Defence, Wei Fenghe, boasted in April 2018 when he was visiting Moscow 'to let the Americans know about close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia'.<sup>32</sup> But this isn't going to be a return to the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, which existed from 1950 until 1979, when it expired after acute differences in the 1960s over the Sino-Soviet split and Soviet threats of nuclear war. It was replaced in 2001 by a 'Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation', which was signed by Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin. It provides, *inter alia*, for increased military cooperation, including the sharing of military know-how and, specifically, China's access to Russian military technology. Recently, that access has deepened to provide for increasingly advanced Russian military equipment sales to China, as well as joint military exercises in the Baltic and East China seas. A Russian expert from the Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok states that Moscow and Beijing 'are sending the message that their strategic partnership is not a paper tiger—it is becoming a political-military force to be reckoned with'.<sup>33</sup> He observes that 'China-Russia military missions outside their borders are bound to continue, with increasing scale and sophistication'.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Lukin, who is Director of the Centre for East Asian Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claims that close Russian-Chinese military and security cooperation 'will play a stabilising role' in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>35</sup>

The American historian Walter Russell Mead has described current Russian and Chinese military activities as 'the latest manifestation of a deepening alliance between Russia and China'.<sup>36</sup> The US Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, says the two Eurasian powers are as close as they were in the 1950s. That may be so, but, as former Australian diplomat in Moscow Bobo Lo has argued, the challenges and potential threats to Russian interests posed by the rise of China are formidable, not least the issue of the relative weakness of Russia vis-à-vis China.<sup>37</sup> He characterises Russia's relationship with China as being hampered by ambivalence and a lack of trust, which results in a fairly cynical 'partnership of convenience'.<sup>38</sup> Given Russia's slow decline and China's rapid rise, we might have expected that Russia would support Western efforts to balance China rather than undermine them. But the evidence is now accumulating to suggest that Russia's relationship with China is deepening—especially militarily and technologically—and this carries distinctly negative geopolitical implications for the West for the foreseeable future.

One of the most important factors in the global strategic outlook for us now is that Putin has negative views about the West similar to those of Xi. Putin's Russia seems set on a path to confrontation with the West and is now challenging the established post-World War II security order in Europe. He accuses the Americans of promoting a model of unilateral domination and changing the balance of forces in order 'to have the opportunity to dictate their will to all'. He also claims that the US is seeking to change the political system and government in Russia. Putin consistently paints a picture of Russia as a victim and target of Western attacks over the centuries, in which the West has constantly tried to destroy it. The prospect of a strategic partnership with a liberal democratic Russia, yearned for by many in the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has become a remote fantasy.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, Moscow has turned its face away from its traditional focus on a Europe that it sees as too weak, too indecisive and too liberal to serve as a strategic partner for Russia.<sup>40</sup> Putin now cultivates the idea of Russian exceptionalism, of Russia's unique Eurasian identity as a country bestriding both Europe and Asia.<sup>41</sup> In the enduring Russian intellectual debate between Westernisers and Slavophiles, which opposes the view of Russia as part of Europe against that of Russia as a distinct civilisation with a world mission, Serhii Plokhy argues that the descendants of the Slavophiles and anti-Westerners now have the upper hand.<sup>42</sup> The crux of Russia's challenge to Europe is Putin's determination to re-establish Russian primacy in the eastern part of Europe and to use the Russian-speaking populations there as an excuse for intervention in the form of the use, or threatened use, of force. An authoritarian Putin contemplates NATO starkly as a military threat, and he speaks of it in hostile language that's

redolent of the Cold War in its drumming up of ultranationalist sentiment on the home front.<sup>43</sup> The Kremlin isn't seeking incremental changes to the current order in Europe. Rather, it aspires to create a totally new one: it sees post-Soviet borders as something to be revised—with military force, if necessary.

Putin perceives his country as facing a weakening Western adversary. The outlook, then, is for further inevitable friction and even confrontation between Russia and the West. The natural state of international affairs for Moscow is that Russia, as a great power, should dominate its neighbourhood and dictate the region's governing structures. The Kremlin's assertion that Europe is in decline and Russia is on the rise implies its belief that the conditions for a revision of the current European international order are improving. In the final analysis, a major military escalation, either by miscalculation or by design, on the European continent by Russia can't be ruled out. At the very least, there's now a potentially dangerous crisis between Russia and the West about values and order in Europe.

# WHAT RISKS MIGHT CHINA AND RUSSIA TAKE?

Risk-taking in international affairs is a fraught business: it should be informed by experience in managing international crises and a thorough knowledge of one's adversaries. Unfortunately, those attributes are rare among modern political leaders. We live in an era of greater strategic disruption and increasing confrontation among the major powers. The disintegration of a coherent Western strategic leadership policy has far-reaching global import for middle powers such as Australia. In addition to the uncertainties surrounding the attitudes of both China and Russia, there's the matter of the Trump administration's deliberate disruption of the international rules-based order. This provides a further impulse to global disruption that's largely to the benefit of 21st-century authoritarian powers, such as China and Russia, that are able to operate more rapidly in a fluid strategic environment.<sup>44</sup> So, what risks might Beijing and Moscow take to recover what both consider to be historical territories belonging to the motherland?

First, it's important to understand that in China and Russia we have two long-established cultures that are different from the Western tradition. They have long memories of humiliation at the hands of the West: in the case of China, its occupation by European powers throughout much of the 19th century; for Russia, successive waves of military attacks from Sweden, France and Germany from the 18th to the 20th century. In addition, they have both lost territories in the modern era, provoked, they would claim, by Western interference. So, Beijing believes that America continues to encourage the independence of Taiwan from China. For Moscow, it's the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which Putin describes as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, that has seen former Russian territories encouraged by the West to become separate countries and members of NATO. Both Russia and China have experienced historical circumstances when their societies have been weak and when the West has taken advantage, including in their respective communist revolutions.

Second, it's typical of large continental powers that they seek to establish territorial spheres of influence to guard their vulnerable land frontiers. In the case of China, which is heavily dependent on international trade between the Indian and Pacific oceans, the regime in Beijing is seeking to establish a sphere of influence in Southeast Asia and control of the South China Sea, through which much of its vital imports of oil passes. Putin claims the right to a sphere of strategic interest in Russia's neighbourhood in which Western influence and involvement will be limited. That sphere of influence includes not only Crimea and Ukraine but also Belarus, the Baltic states and Kazakhstan, where there are substantial ethnic Russian minorities.<sup>45</sup>

Third, both China and Russia assert that they're deeply concerned about what they see as Western interference in their domestic political systems. China's latest Defence White Paper recognises that what it describes as separatist movements are 'becoming more acute' in places such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang ('East Turkestan') and are a potentially serious threat to domestic stability.<sup>46</sup> Putin sees the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine as a Western precursor to undermining his own regime. Maintaining domestic stability and power at all costs is the priority of both these authoritarian regimes.

Fourth, recovering lost territories also serves to divert the attention of the population away from domestic grievances and towards external threats and stokes a strong sense of nationalism that can easily be aroused in both China and Russia. Historically in international affairs, the open wound of lost territories has served as a potent

instrument for building national solidarity and forging a strong national identity.<sup>47</sup> So, Putin's grabs for territory in Georgia, Crimea and eastern Ukraine have been generally popular in a Russia that's long held xenophobic views. Similarly, in China there's strong nationalist support for Beijing's claims to the South China Sea, as well as reintegrating Taiwan and Hong Kong into a greater China.

Fifth, both China and Russia have effectively used incremental territorial claims recently to their military advantage. China's creeping militarisation of the entire South China Sea is now an established fact. Similarly, Russia's use of military force in Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea has been imposed without effective military challenges from the West. In both Beijing and Moscow there's every reason why they should consider these as effective models to continue demonstrating their great-power status.

## Low-risk territorial opportunities

This brings us to the question of the circumstances under which these two authoritarian powers might collude to settle their outstanding territorial claims by using force or coercion at an opportune time of Western weakness and distraction. Beijing and Moscow may begin with what they might see as low-risk territorial acquisitions. For example, China could seek to reinforce its territorial claims over the South China Sea by seizing Taiwan-occupied Taiping Island (Itu Aba), which is the largest of the contested islets in the South China Sea (see Figure 1). This may be a way of punishing Taiwan should cross-strait relations seriously worsen. The island has a 1,200-metre airstrip capable of taking C-130 military aircraft, a pier and its own freshwater supply. In World War II, it was apparently a Japanese submarine facility.<sup>48</sup> It would be unlikely that Washington would confront Beijing militarily over this issue, given America's proclaimed lack of an official position about the merits of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Figure 1: China—selected territorial interests



A significantly higher risk alternative would be for China to occupy the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are claimed by Japan and China. They're uninhabited and were historically used as maritime navigational markers. In 1972, administrative control of the islands was transferred to Japan from the US. In recent years, there have been frequent clashes and near misses around the islands by Chinese and Japanese warships, coastguard vessels and fishing boats. Washington has made it clear that Japan's claim to the islands comes within the understandings of its formal Treaty of Mutual Security with Japan. This means that defence of the islands by Japan would require the US to come to Japan's aid.<sup>49</sup> But China might conclude that Washington would be likely to climb down over a military clash about uninhabited rocks. If that were to occur, it would confirm that the strategic gains evident from China's militarisation in the South China Sea had changed US calculations about the risks of confronting China. Such a *fait accompli* would also confirm Beijing's military pre-eminence in East Asia and undermine Japan's confidence in its alliance with America.

Russia might consider using military force in such places as Moldova and Kazakhstan, which would be at the low-risk end of the spectrum of potential conflict with the West (see Figure 2). Neither Moldova nor Kazakhstan is a member of NATO and they aren't democracies. Kazakhstan shares a long border with Russia, but Moldova shares borders with Romania—which is a member of NATO—and Ukraine. Moldova was the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia, but, when it separated from the USSR in 1991, the eastern part of the country, adjoining Ukraine, proclaimed itself the independent country of Transdniestria and was occupied by the 14th Russian Guards Army. Transdniestria still claims independence from Moldova, and the Russians continue to encourage that status. About 34% of the Transdniestria population are Russians and thus provide Russia with a ready excuse for intervention. Occupation of Transdniestria would enable Russia to threaten the western parts of Ukraine, including the strategically located city of Odessa, which has a significant pro-Russian element in its population.

Figure 2: Russia—selected territorial interests



The boundaries of Kazakhstan, as well as those of the other former Soviet Central Asian ‘stans’, were devised by Stalin in the 1920s as part of the ‘communist nationalities’ project. They reflect few historically rigorous ethnographic boundaries. Northern Kazakhstan is an extension of the steppe lands of southern Russia. About 4 million Russians still live in Kazakhstan, where they account for about a quarter of the Kazakh population. Many of them were originally sent to the northern parts of Kazakhstan in the 1950s and 1960s as part of Khrushchev’s crash program of growing wheat in the ‘virgin lands’. They figured prominently in Soviet heroic agricultural history. The Russians might be on solid ground for concluding that the Kazakhstan authorities probably see them as the lesser evil—compared with China—as the would-be regional hegemon of Central Asia.<sup>50</sup> At present, there’s no compelling reason for Russia to invade and seize northern Kazakhstan, unless it undergoes what the Russians see as a Western-sponsored colour revolution away from autocracy.<sup>51</sup> In that case, Moscow might well employ a tactic similar to its occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine, including the use of grey-zone operations.

## High-risk territorial opportunities

We now consider more important territories that China and Russia have ambitions to absorb, but which might involve the risk of major military conflict with NATO in Europe and America in East Asia. President Xi has made it clear that reunifying Taiwan with the mainland is central to his concept of completing the China Dream. He has said Taiwan has to be solved by ‘the current generation’, which could be taken to imply within the period of Xi’s leadership (previous formulations referred to future generations). The People’s Liberation Army continues to prepare for contingencies in the Taiwan Strait to deter and, if necessary, compel Taiwan to abandon moves towards independence.<sup>52</sup> China is preparing for a contingency to unify Taiwan with the mainland by force if necessary. According to the Pentagon, however, there’s no indication that China is significantly expanding its landing ship force, which would be necessary for an amphibious assault on Taiwan.<sup>53</sup> Large-scale amphibious invasion is one of the most complicated and difficult military operations, and an attempt to invade Taiwan would ‘likely strain China’s armed forces and invite international intervention’, according to the Pentagon.<sup>54</sup>

But China has a vast array of other options. Beijing would be likely to decide that it had no other alternative if Taiwan effectively moved to declare independence—no matter what the risk of direct military confrontation with America. China could use a variety of disruptive tactics as a precursor to attacking Taiwan, such as deniable military operations using special operations forces against leadership targets, probably in conjunction with clandestine economic and political activities, including information warfare on Taiwanese social media and cyberattacks against economic infrastructure, such as electricity generation and air traffic control systems.

The Taiwan contingency is an increasingly urgent matter of both national prestige and territorial integrity for Beijing, especially as the younger generation of the 23 million people of Taiwan increasingly see themselves as being Taiwanese citizens, not Chinese. Beijing makes no promise to renounce the use of force and, as the Chinese Defence Minister has recently pronounced, ‘If anyone dares to split Taiwan from China, the Chinese military has no choice but to fight at all costs for national unity.’<sup>55</sup> Such a fight between China and the US would be a major military confrontation, risking the use of nuclear weapons.

That would also be a major risk in any serious military conflict between Russia and NATO over Russian territorial expansionism. The territories of interest here to Moscow include the Baltic countries and Ukraine. I have excluded Belarus even though it’s a former Soviet territory and arguably is the Slavic culture closest to that of Russia. President Alexander Lukashenko has the same authoritarian style as Putin and runs an equally repressive regime. In the 1990s, Russia and Belarus considered having a so-called Union State with a common flag, anthem and head of state and a unified military. That hasn’t occurred, and Lukashenko has made it plain that he doesn’t want to see his country become part of the Russian Federation. Even so, it seems unlikely that absorbing the territory of Belarus is as geopolitically important to Moscow as absorbing one of the Baltic countries or Ukraine—as long as Belarus behaves itself.

The Baltic countries are seen by many Russians as historically part of Russia, as former imperial possessions and as part of its 'sphere of legitimate interests' today. I have chosen Estonia because its eastern border with Russia is only 120 kilometres from Saint Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. Estonia's Russians account for a quarter of the total population; the capital of Tallinn is 35% Russian, but the eastern provinces of Estonia, such as Narva, adjoining the border with Russia are more than 80% Russian. There are two strategic imperatives here for Russia. The first is Moscow's continuing and deep-seated resentment of the expansion of NATO to the very borders of the greatly reduced Russian Federation. Putin sees NATO as a serious threat, intruding on what in imperial fashion he terms the 'near abroad'; that is, those countries with which Russia has common borders and in which substantial numbers of Russians now live.<sup>56</sup> The rapid loss of immense power when the Soviet Union collapsed couldn't help but set the stage for revisionist territorial longings in a country with Russia's imperial tradition. Second, Putin probably views Estonia with disdain because it's a small country with a population of 1.3 million and armed forces of only 6,000, which are planned to have a wartime strength of scarcely 21,000. The nearest Russian military base is at Pskov, which is only 25 kilometres from the border with Estonia, and where the battle-experienced 76th Guards Air Assault Division is located.<sup>57</sup>

Even so, if Russia wanted to invade Estonia it would have to calculate the risk of going to war with NATO, with the attendant dangers of the use of nuclear weapons. However, Putin may believe that he could occupy such a small country very quickly (some Western studies suggest in 48–72 hours). Moscow could, for example, under the guise of one of Russia's snap military exercises, put 80,000 troops into Estonia with little, if any, intelligence warning for the West.<sup>58</sup> He might also calculate that the presence of extremely limited numbers of NATO troops in Estonia and the other Baltic countries would be no military obstacle.<sup>59</sup> Putin might decide to prepare the attack by using hybrid warfare (including cyberattacks on Estonian infrastructure, as Russia did in 2007) and infiltrating 'little green men' to assassinate Russian citizens and blame the authorities in Tallinn for it. He would then respond militarily with what he would proclaim was the legitimate protection of ethnic Russians. Putin would thus achieve strategic surprise and force NATO to negotiate a political solution that allowed Russia to hold onto its territorial gains.<sup>60</sup> If NATO attempted to mount a major conventional military assault in retaliation, then Moscow's new nuclear doctrine would be to threaten the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

By comparison with Estonia, an attempt by Russia to annex Ukraine militarily would be a completely different matter. It's geographically the largest country in Europe and has a population of 42 million. Russia and Ukraine have deeply divided views of each other's history and culture. Moscow sees Ukraine as Russia's little Slavic brother: as Alexandr Solzhenitsyn once said, 'All we Russians have some Ukrainian blood.' The Cyrillic script and the Russian Orthodox faith had their beginnings in 12th-century Kyiv. Under Catherine the Great in the 18th century, imperial Russia expanded southwards into what it termed *Novaya Rossiya* (New Russia), defeated the Turks and Tartars, took possession of Crimea and built the Russian Black Sea Fleet. This was known as 'the gathering of the Russian lands'. Ukraine, however, has deep resentment of Russian domination, the destruction of its language and culture, and the Soviet-induced famine (*Holodomor*) in 1930–33 that led to the deaths of from 3 million to 7 million people. Today, Kyiv suffers the humiliation of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its effective occupation and detachment of the eastern Donbass area of Ukraine during the last five years.

The question now is: what further steps might Moscow take to recover what it sees as its lost Ukrainian territories? A full-scale invasion and prolonged occupation of Ukraine are probably beyond the military capabilities of Russia at present. But it could, for example, further consolidate its military presence in eastern Ukraine, which is a part of the country that's largely of Russian extraction and where the Russian Orthodox Church predominates. As a first step, it could build up its military presence in eastern Ukraine, extend the area of its domination across the northern littoral of the Sea of Azov and increase its militarisation of the Black Sea generally.

In the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the Russian Army kept between 40,000 and 150,000 troops in full combat-ready formations at various times across the Russian–Ukrainian border and at the same time conducted manoeuvres in other parts of the country involving up to 80,000 armed services personnel.<sup>61</sup> As already noted, Russian operations in Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine featured elements of counterinsurgency, war among the people, opacity of the

identity and affiliation of participants, and an unclear chain of command. Russia's use of force in Crimea and Ukraine has been described as a 21st-century offensive that builds on Soviet and Russian traditions but that incorporates new thinking and 21st-century tools.<sup>62</sup>

On Ukraine, Putin has quoted a leader of the Russian White Army of the revolutionary era, General Anton Denikin, as follows:

[N]o Russian, reactionary or democratic, Republican or authoritarian, will ever allow Ukraine to be torn away. The foolish, baseless and externally aggravated quarrel between Muscovite Rus' and Kievan Rus' is our internal quarrel, of no concern to anyone else, and it will be decided by ourselves.<sup>63</sup>

On a visit to Kyiv in July 2013, Putin embraced the idea, previously articulated by the Orthodox Church, that Russians and Ukrainians are one and the same people.<sup>64</sup> The questions of who constitutes the Russian people and where Russia begins and ends continue to be prominent in Putin's utterances. As Serhii Plokhy, Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University, observes, many in the Kremlin and elsewhere in Russia see Ukraine as an artificial formation and regard the possibility of Ukraine leaving the Russian sphere of influence as an attack on Russia itself.<sup>65</sup>

The existential threat to Russia, as seen in Moscow, would be encouragement by America and the EU for Ukraine to become a member of NATO. Such a move could prove to be a geopolitical disaster and, indeed, a provocation for Moscow to go to war, despite the consequences. Henry Kissinger has argued that Ukraine should not join NATO.<sup>66</sup> It would be one thing for Ukraine to become a member of the EU—always presuming it could satisfy the requirements for democracy, justice and free markets—but it would be an entirely different matter for NATO to be occupying what many Russians still see as the historic heartland of their civilisation in Kyiv (or Kiev, as they call it). The Kremlin wants Ukraine to serve as a buffer between Russia and NATO, not as a launch pad to potentially threaten Moscow's southern approaches.<sup>67</sup>

# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST, INCLUDING AUSTRALIA

We now need to consider four final questions:

- What's the likelihood of China and Russia colluding to take over these territories, what's the risk of a general war with NATO and the US, and might nuclear weapons be used?
- Will China and Russia be able to sustain their coordinated campaigns and, if so, for how long?
- How might America react and is it capable of sustaining two major regional conflicts simultaneously?
- What are the implications of all this for the West, including Australia?

There can be little doubt now that China and Russia are combining their forces to balance against the US, which they see as their common enemy. In the past, I haven't considered that to be a practical proposition, given the deep-seated traditional antagonisms between those two countries, the relative weakness of Russia vis-à-vis China, and the fact that many in Russia consider China as a future security challenge.<sup>68</sup> The Australian Russian expert and former diplomat in Moscow, Bobo Lo, considers that the challenges and potential threats to Russian interests posed by the rise of China are formidable, not least the issue of the relative weakness of Russia.<sup>69</sup> He characterises Russia's relationship with China as being hampered by ambivalence and a lack of trust, which results in a fairly cynical 'partnership of convenience'.<sup>70</sup> But he also recognises that the risk of direct confrontation between the US and Russia has increased tangibly, putting Washington and Moscow on a collision course. In some respects, the current situation between Russia and the US is worse than it was in the Cold War because it's more volatile and unpredictable. Moreover, the nuclear arms control agreements that existed in the past have been dumped, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence Treaty of 1972. And it's unlikely that the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) of 2010 will be renewed in 2021, when it's due to be extended until 2026.<sup>71</sup>

The fact is that Russia's relations with China are now much closer than ever before. Putin seems to have concluded that the door to the West is closed and he has turned his back on Europe. China is strong and decisive enough to serve as a strategic partner, while Russia seeks to reassert itself as an independent great power between Europe and China. Putin has said that the main struggle underway is that for global leadership and this seems to imply that Russia isn't going to contest China on this. For its part, China is responding to its newly competitive confrontation with the US by deepening its strategic relationship with Russia. China has no other strong major-power relationships: its relations with Japan, India and the EU are poor. China and Russia are now allied in a quest to refashion the world order into one that's safe for their respective authoritarian systems. Both leaders have reasons to be gratified by global trends, and they're 'out-gaming' the West. China and Russia believe they can't afford to have poor relations with each other at a time of great strategic opportunity when the Western alliance is now in disarray. Kyle Wilson concludes that perceptions of a convergent strategic calculus between China and Russia outweigh both the historical legacy and tensions inherent in the relationship—especially Russia's junior status—and one of the sharpest cultural divides anywhere.<sup>72</sup> Neither side feels it can afford to have poor relations with the other for the foreseeable future.

So, to answer our first question: the current relationship between China and Russia is unequalled in its historically long perspective. It suits both to take advantage of the current favourable geopolitical position, given the weaknesses of the West—including the distraction of Trump’s America. There is, therefore, no reason why Beijing and Moscow shouldn’t collude to take (in their world view, the verb ‘retake’ is more accurate) some of the territories explored in this paper. They may have concluded that America wouldn’t risk a general war over such lesser territorial events as China evicting Taiwan from the island of Taiping in the South China Sea or Russia formally detaching Transdnistria from Moldova. It would be a riskier step for them to collude in a grab for the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the northern parts of Kazakhstan. With regard to the latter, however, Aleksandr Golts is of the view that it isn’t out of the question that the Kremlin will take the risk of new military adventures, and he specifically mentions that the scene of the next victorious war ‘will be the so-called Russian regions of Kazakhstan’.<sup>73</sup> None of the above examples would involve the risk of general war with NATO or the US.

But the examples we have examined of higher risk territorial claims by China and Russia—specifically, China invading Taiwan and Russia occupying Estonia or Ukraine—clearly involve the risk of escalation. Regarding Taiwan, however, two of my colleagues at the Australian National University, Professors Hugh White and Brendan Taylor, are of the view that the game is over for Taiwan. White argues that no American leader can dismiss the risk that a conflict with China over Taiwan would escalate to a nuclear exchange involving devastating strikes on US cities, which he asserts would prevent the US from coming to Taiwan’s defence.<sup>74</sup> Taylor holds the view that America’s ability to intervene in the Taiwan Strait is receding and is already at its limit. Any US advantage would be likely to be gone in a decade, he claims, thus allowing Beijing to deny America access to the theatre, while an attempt by the US to re-engage risks sparking ‘a war like no other’.<sup>75</sup> My view is different: in the event of an unprovoked Chinese attack, if the US doesn’t come to the defence of Taiwan that will mark the end of the alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan and South Korea would be likely to develop their own nuclear weapons. If America does defend Taiwan and Australia refuses to make a military contribution, that will threaten the existence of the ANZUS Treaty.<sup>76</sup> So, there are big stakes here for Japan, South Korea and Australia.

Regarding Russia, Moscow may judge that it could mount a surprise attack on Estonia before NATO had in place forces of a size to threaten Russia with a general war. However, if NATO then proceeded to build up a large conventional force technologically superior to that of Russia, then Moscow would threaten the use of tactical nuclear weapons. That would face NATO with the only option left, of escalating into a strategic nuclear exchange. The Ukrainian contingency is an order of magnitude greater for Moscow than any other.

According to some Russian analysts, there are other plausible scenarios in which a Russia in severe economic crisis might push the Kremlin to increase instability on its borders. Whether in the form of a hybrid campaign or the open use of its military, ‘Russia could unleash a campaign to secure full control of its western non-NATO member states’, says Russian political analyst Anton Barbashin.<sup>77</sup> He argues that Moscow could instigate a NATO assault on Russia on the territory of its closest neighbours—such as Moldova and Belarus—‘convincing Russia’s domestic population that the only way to prevent open war with NATO would be a pre-emptive strike on Kyiv’. This is a pessimistic war scenario based on a Russia which has embarked on a path leading to economic decay and international isolation that potentially threatens to ruin it as a state. In this scenario, the level of dissatisfaction among the population drives the Kremlin to pursue foreign military adventures.

We turn now to the question of whether China and Russia will be able to sustain their coordinated campaigns and, if so, for how long. The answer depends upon judgements about not only the magnitude of Western resolve, but also whether the China–Russia relationship is strong enough to sustain coordinated military action in such separate geographical theatres. Central to this proposition is the answer to our third question about how America might react and whether it’s capable of sustaining two major regional conflicts simultaneously.

We don’t have good insights into the sustainability of the Russian and Chinese armed forces in a major conflict. There can be little doubt, however, that the build-up of their militaries suggests that they’re both increasingly preparing for armed conflict with the West. Russia regularly practises nationwide exercises, such as Vostok 2018, which was its largest military exercise since 1981 and involved more than 300,000 troops, including some from

China. Recent Russian military exercises have looked like preparing less for counterterrorist actions than for inter-state war, and this has been a feature of all Russian military exercises in recent years.<sup>78</sup> Russia and China have also begun coordinated operations involving nuclear-capable strategic bombers. In their first-ever joint air patrol on 23 July 2019, two Chinese H-6K bombers joined two Russian Tu-95MS bombers and an A-50 early warning and control aircraft over the East China Sea and entered the airspace over the Dokdo/Takashima Islands, which are claimed by both South Korea and Japan.<sup>79</sup> South Korean and Japanese fighters were scrambled to intercept, and South Korean fighters fired warning shots. This is how crises could emerge by design or miscalculation. Moreover, South Korea and Japan started squabbling over who owns the airspace over these tiny islands and therefore had the rights of intercept. This showed up the fragility of the strategic order between two US allies in that part of the world. It highlighted the fact that the sense of common interests between Japan and South Korea is very fragile in the absence of US leadership and raises the question whether this was the deliberate intention of those who directed the Chinese and Russian bombers.

In the territorial scenarios we envisage, both Russia and China would be operating with the geographical advantage of inflicting war on neighbouring territories, whereas the US and NATO would be faced with considerable distances for power projection and logistics support across the northern Pacific and across Europe. Dimitri Simes—who has consistently argued that America should make unilateral concessions to Russia—has observed that treating Russia as an outright enemy could result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, ‘triggering mortal threats to its neighbours’.<sup>80</sup> Regarding China, Yan Xuetong (who is one of China’s leading foreign policy experts) has claimed that, over the next five years, popular support for independence in Taiwan could develop further, bringing the risk of a fully fledged stand-off between China and the US.<sup>81</sup>

As of this writing, five months of violent demonstrations in Hong Kong have provoked a spokesperson for the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the People’s Republic of China State Council to proclaim that these ‘first signs of terrorism’ must be punished ‘without leniency, without mercy’.<sup>82</sup> Beijing is strongly signalling that it’s prepared to use force. But if it does, that will spell the end of its ‘one country, two systems’ attempts to win over an increasingly independent Taiwan. That might then encourage in Beijing the view that the only realistic option open to it is to use military force against Taiwan sooner rather than later.

We turn now to the question of how America might react to these scenarios and whether the US is capable of sustaining two major regional conflicts simultaneously. The first point to make is that America undoubtedly has enough nuclear weapons to take on China and Russia simultaneously and render them destroyed as modern functioning societies. In turn, Russia is the only country capable of destroying the US. China probably has a survivable second-strike nuclear capability, but it’s developing a large number of theatre nuclear weapons to target US forces pre-emptively throughout the Asia–Pacific region.

The US *Nuclear Posture Review 2018* calls for a ‘flexible, tailored nuclear deterrence strategy’ to provide the President with flexibility to adapt the approach ‘to deterring one or more potential adversaries in different circumstances’.<sup>83</sup> The review observes that Russia’s threat of first use of nuclear weapons to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favourable to Russia increases the prospect for dangerous miscalculation and escalation.<sup>84</sup> It states that geopolitical uncertainty, including the potential for rapid shifts in how other countries view the US, must be taken into account in formulating American nuclear strategy. The review concludes that potential adversaries must understand that aggression against the US, its allies or its partners will fail and result in intolerable costs for them.<sup>85</sup> That, of course, depends on whether an adversary really believes that the US would engage in nuclear war.

According to the review, effective deterrence of Russia requires ensuring that ‘the Russian leadership does not miscalculate regarding the consequences of limited nuclear first use, either regionally or against the United States itself’.<sup>86</sup> The fact is, however, that Russia has a much wider range of tactical nuclear weapons available than does the US. Regarding China, the review states that the US is prepared to respond decisively to Chinese non-nuclear or nuclear aggression, including its limited use of theatre nuclear weapons against US, allied and partner interests. But it also acknowledges that the US has removed all its nuclear weapons based in Asia and instead relies ‘almost exclusively’ on its strategic nuclear capabilities for the assurance of allies in the region.<sup>87</sup> The US wants to introduce

new theatre ballistic missiles into the region to counteract the large number already deployed by China. So, both China and Russia must calculate whether or not the US would use nuclear weapons in the territorial examples considered in this paper. I have explained how a failure to defend Taiwan would have serious implications for extended nuclear deterrence on behalf of other American allies in the Asia–Pacific region, such as Japan and South Korea. Estonia is a different matter because it’s a member of NATO, and a failure by America to respond to the threatened use of Russian tactical nuclear weapons would unravel the entire fabric of the European alliance. But Ukraine isn’t a member of NATO and it no longer has nuclear weapons of its own. So, Moscow may judge that America wouldn’t become involved in defending Ukraine, especially if it were bogged down trying to defeat a major Chinese attack on Taiwan.

This brings us to the other central issue of concern for the West—the fact that, unlike in the post–Cold War decades, America is now incapable of fighting two major regional wars simultaneously. The rapid development of China’s conventional military capability, together with serious reforms in Russia’s military forces, is occurring at a time when America can fight only one major regional conflict and mount a holding operation in another regional conflict. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* acknowledges that American competitive military advantage has been eroding and that the central challenge to US security is the re-emergence of long-term strategic competition with China and Russia.<sup>88</sup> America aims to maintain favourable regional balances of power in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe, but that will be a particularly challenging task, given China’s rising power in Asia and Russia’s flexing of its military muscles in Europe.

The key strategic issue as seen from Beijing and Moscow is the admission in the *2018 National Defense Strategy* that ‘the fully mobilized’ US force will be capable of ‘defeating aggression by a major power’ and only ‘detering opportunistic aggression elsewhere’.<sup>89</sup> This major gap in US war fighting is further qualified by the recognition that America’s backlog of deferred readiness, procurement and modernisation can no longer be ignored, as a former US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis understood and began to address.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, much of America’s force employment models and posture still dates from the immediate post–Cold War era, when its military advantage was unchallenged and the primary threats were rogue regimes. We can only presume that decision-makers in Beijing and Moscow will be fully alert to these serious gaps in US military capabilities when they’re making decisions about the sorts of military risks canvassed in this paper.

So, what are the implications of all of this for the West? The fact is that the West is entering a period of great strategic disruption and instability. America’s obsession with looking inward and ‘making America great again’ opens fresh geopolitical possibilities for China and Russia. The most obvious risk for the West is, of course, that military confrontations with China and Russia might slide unpredictably into a state of general war. The sorts of risks inherent in the territorial grabs for power I have canvassed range, on the one hand, from expectation that America and its allies wouldn’t respond to the less important geographical challenges to, on the other hand, the grave security implications for the Western allied community of not responding to an outright Chinese invasion of Taiwan or a Russian occupation of Estonia or Ukraine.

There are also potential complications beyond merely the effects on the West: would China’s and Russia’s territorial adventurism encourage other countries to settle outstanding territorial issues? An obvious example is Kashmir, where there’s a longstanding territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, which India now seems to want to resolve in its favour. And what about North Korea?

# CONCLUSION

If nothing else, this paper demonstrates the need for Western intelligence services to closely follow and understand China's strategic relationship with Russia. This is especially the case given Russia's attitude that the Western-led liberal system is collapsing and China's view that our future world will be divided along non-Western and Western lines. Deterring China and Russia and avoiding war by accident or through miscalculation is the most important demand in the current strategic outlook. But so is acceptance that what we're dealing with here is understanding what might be termed 'unknown knowns'. That is, we know how these particular territories figure in the historical and cultural memories of China and Russia, but we don't know when—and whether—Beijing and Moscow will decide to use military force to regain them.

The implications for Australia relate not only to the dangers of armed conflict involving China and Russia against the West. Some of those conflicts—for example, Taiwan—might involve Australia directly. Others, such as Ukraine, we'd be well advised to avoid. Because of our geography, the Chinese contingencies will be of more direct strategic relevance to us than those involving Russia in Europe. However, we might have to reconsider whether or not in the eventuality of a Russian attack we would contribute to the defence of a democratic Estonia or other democracies in Eastern Europe that are members of NATO. But there's another important issue for Australia involving Russia much more directly: Moscow is now supplying China with increasingly advanced conventional weapons (quiet submarines, advanced combat aircraft, capable air defence systems, supersonic anti-ship missiles) and in October 2019 Putin announced that Russia will help China create its own early warning missile defence system. These Russian weapons help to undermine our long-held margin of technological advantage against military forces in our region of primary strategic interest, including the forces of China.

Finally, all this leads me to the question: is there nothing that can be done about the growing strategic alignment between China and Russia? The classical balance-of-power response to such a question would be to postulate an American attempt to detach Russia and cement its partnership with the US. Brzezinski has raised exactly such a possibility of establishing a sounder US relationship with Moscow and peeling Russia away from China. That would require great geostrategic skill to prevent the emergence 'of a hostile coalition that could eventually seek to challenge America's primacy'.<sup>91</sup> France's President Emmanuel Macron believes it isn't in Europe's interest to drive Russia further into China's arms. However, improvements in relations between the EU and Russia will come neither quickly nor easily. In the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union sometimes made progress in one facet of their relationship—such as negotiating limits on their respective nuclear forces—while they remained in conflict over other aspects.<sup>92</sup>

Alas, history doesn't repeat itself like that: Russia now nurtures a deep-seated hatred of the West. The state-controlled media in Russia portray the West—meaning the US and its allies—as irrationally and irrevocably hostile to Russia. And Putin believes that the previous Western-led international system has collapsed. Thus, nothing is likely to change the current adversarial nature of US–Russia relations. Brzezinski's warning that the most dangerous scenario facing US security would be a grand coalition of China and Russia is now fast becoming a geopolitical fact.

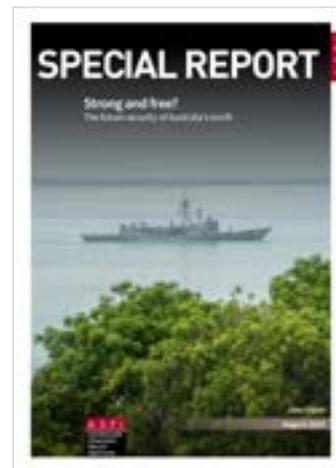
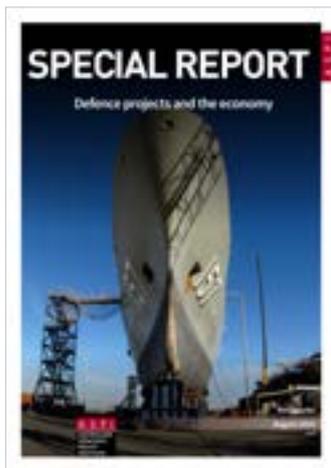
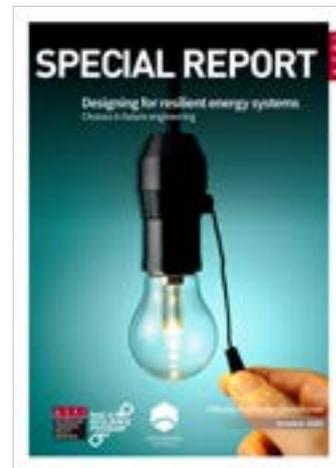
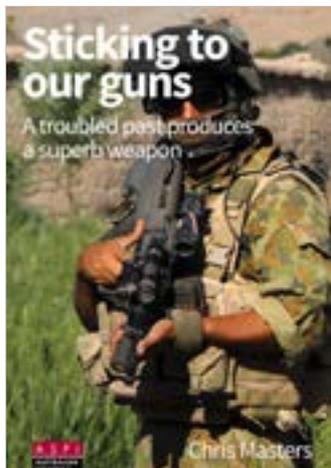
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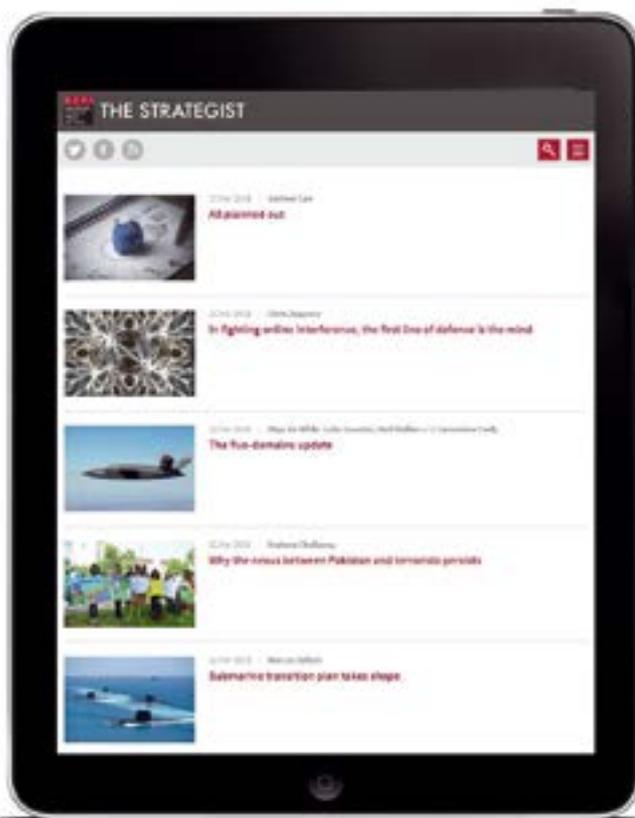


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**How the geopolitical partnership between  
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