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The return of geography

Paul Dibb

The title of this chapter might suggest that geography has somehow gone missing in action as a body of strategic knowledge. While it is true that some theoreticians bought the superficial view at the end of the Cold War that geography had had its day, that was never the view of those of us who were senior defence policy officers. Strategic theories come and go, but the abiding nature of a nation's geography remains a key defence planning tool. Indeed, I would agree with Australia's greatest Secretary for Defence, Sir Arthur Tange, who said in 1986: 'The map of one's own country is the most fundamental of all defence documentation.'¹ He also presciently asserted that the nature of Australia's physical environment demands that maritime capabilities occupy a prominent place in defence.²

None of this is to argue that I am a geographical determinist, as some would have it. Geography clearly varies according to a nation's strategic circumstances and, importantly, its perceptions of threat or the lack of one. Geography operates for Australia as a crucial consideration when it comes to the defence of the continent and the location of the archipelago to our immediate north. As Robert Kaplan argues in his book *The Revenge of Geography*, we all need to recover sensibility about the relevance of geography that has been lost in the current era when

1 Sir Arthur Tange, *Defence Policy Administration and Organisation: Selected Lectures 1971–1986*, Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales, Canberra, 1992, p. 90.

2 Ibid., p. 74.

some commentators—such as the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman—talk glibly about a flat world where geography no longer matters.³ As Kaplan notes, the end of the Cold War led to a mistaken view that globalisation and economic interdependence would inevitably lead to the end of geopolitical rivalries among great powers and to the emergence of a more enlightened liberal order.⁴ Others argue that modern military technology has effectively cancelled geography, which, as Colin Gray observes, has just enough merit to be a plausible fallacy.⁵ Despite trendy talk of a ‘borderless world’, the control of territory is still fundamental to world politics.

As the longest serving former Head of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (SDSC), I thought it appropriate for this 50th anniversary essay to address the role of geography conceptually in the following areas of my current work: first, the importance of geopolitics in Putin’s Russia and Moscow’s challenge to established borders in Europe; second, China’s territorial ambitions—especially in the South China Sea, which has been described by the Chancellor of this university as the most dangerous strategic issue in our region; third, the renewed importance of Australia’s geographical location and its relevance to the US ‘pivot’ to Asia.

I see these three issues in the broader context of what I fear is a dangerous era unfolding strategically at the global level. In my view, we have two large authoritarian powers—China and Russia—challenging the liberal international order led by the United States and its democratic allies at a time when domestic politics in the West are in disarray over the impact of globalisation. Now is not the time for the West to be preoccupied domestically just when China and Russia are issuing challenges to the established order and flexing their military muscles.

Geopolitics and Russia today

First, then, let us turn to the geographic ambitions of a resurgent Russia.⁶ They exist at two levels: to reassert Russia as a great power (*velikaya derzhava*) and to recover lost territories. Putin is determined to

3 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, Random House, New York, 2012, p. xix.

4 Ibid., p. 4.

5 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 33.

6 For a more detailed exposition of these views see Paul Dibb, ‘Why Russia is a threat to the international order’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute Strategy paper, June 2016.

recover Russia's standing in the Eurasian geopolitical space. As former British Ambassador to Russia Roderic Lyne explains, President Putin's 'new model Russia' is that of an independent great power resuming its geopolitical position on its own terms. Lyne states that this reflects a deep sense of insecurity and a fear that Russia's interest would be threatened if it were to lose control of its neighbourhood.⁷ Putin speaks of Russia's civilising mission on the Eurasian continent. He claims the right to a sphere of strategic interest in Russia's neighbourhood in which Western influence and involvement would be limited. That sphere includes not only Crimea and Ukraine but also the Baltic countries, Belarus, Moldova and northern Kazakhstan. Putin's Russia is set on a path of confrontation with the West and is now challenging the established post-World War II security order in Europe. The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, has described Russia as presenting 'the greatest threat to our national security', and US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has accused Russia of endangering world order and making threatening statements about its potential use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the use of tactical nuclear weapons now figures prominently in Russia's new military doctrine.⁸ Moreover, Moscow is now capable of deploying 150,000 troops with little or no warning, probably under the disguise (*maskirovka*) of a major exercise, into any of the countries of its near abroad. This is not to argue that Russia has recovered the military power of the former Soviet Union. It has not, but it needs to be remembered that, from Putin's perspective, Russia faces a weak and divided Europe. And it is a fact that most Russians do not accept that there can be such an independent state as Ukraine.

Putin paints a picture of Russia as a victim and target of Western attack over the centuries with the West constantly trying to destroy it. Nikolai Patrushev, the head of Russia's Security Council and a KGB veteran, accuses the United States of wanting Russia to cease to exist as a nation, and Sergei Naryshkin, a close Putin ally and speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, suggests that the United States is trying to goad Russia into war.⁹ These are obsessive assertions with little basis in fact and are more a reflection of centuries of Russia's paranoia about the

7 Roderic Lyne, 'Russia's changed outlook on the West: From convergence to confrontation', in *The Russian Challenge: Chatham House Report*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, June 2015, p. 11.

8 Dibb, 'Why Russia is a threat to the international order', p. 11.

9 Ibid., p. 8.

vulnerability of its borders and its insecurity as a nation-state. But we ignore them at our peril. And I am not one of those who accept that the weakness of Russia's economy will make Putin more cautious—rather the opposite. What we have been seeing of late are many highly disturbing incidents by Russia involving violations of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries' national airspace, narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, close encounters at sea, simulated attack runs with nuclear-capable aircraft and other dangerous actions on a regular basis over a very wide geographical area, including the Baltic, Black and North Seas, the Arctic and along the US and Canadian borders. Moscow has used military force to recover territory in Georgia and Crimea and is destabilising Ukraine by its occupation of the Donbass. And in Syria, we saw in 2015 Russia's first use of military power outside the former Soviet security sphere. This marked Putin's reassertion of Russia's military power and his retaliation for the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders through his own use of military force in Syria on the borders of a NATO member, Turkey. Russia's military intervention in Syria had a decisive effect and gained it a place at the negotiating table, ensuring that the United States can no longer ignore Moscow's interests in the Middle East.

Many Western observers have consistently misread Russia and the way it is driven by its geography, history and culture. One of the problems here is that insufficient attention has been paid in the West to the evolution of Russian military thinking in the post-Cold War period. A recent Chatham House research paper states that Western policy-makers' grasp of the Russian leadership's motivations and decision-making processes, and especially in respect of military matters, has been degraded.¹⁰ Current Russian ambitions, followed to their conclusion, will inevitably lead to a more direct confrontation with the West. Russia's political will to resort to force when necessary seems to be entirely absent in Europe these days. Managing the increasing threats Russia poses to international order is now arguably the most serious issue facing the West. This is not to underestimate the challenge emanating from a rising China, but China—unlike Russia—does not pose a potential existential threat to world peace in the same way.

10 Andrew Monaghan, 'A new "Cold War"? Abusing history, misunderstanding Russia', research paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, May 2015, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150522_ColdWarRussiaMonaghan.pdf (retrieved 21 January 2018).

At the very least, Moscow's attitude regarding the status of the 14 newly independent states formed out of the collapse of the Soviet Union is that they are intimately linked to Russia, are to a greater or lesser extent historically part of Russia and form Russia's security perimeter. From Moscow's perspective, they must therefore be recognised as within Russia's sphere of strategic interest and must not be permitted to act in ways that are deemed to be contrary to Russia's vital interests. Putin sees his country as facing a weak Europe, ineffective and leaderless, overwhelmed by a huge refugee problem, and with the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (EU) as heralding the unravelling of European unity.

The final issue I wish to raise about Russia pertains to some of the disturbing geopolitical propositions that have been gaining traction in Moscow. Most prominently, there is the idea of 'Eurasia', which Putin is proselytising. Starting with the Slavophiles in the 19th century, many Russian intellectuals saw Europeanness as the main problem of defining Russia's nationhood. Since 1991, the terms 'Eurasia' and 'Eurasianism' have once again come to prominence on the post-Soviet political scene. As Marlene Laruelle observes, this terminology suggests that Russia occupies a dual or median position between Europe and Asia.¹¹ It rejects the view that Russia is on the periphery of Europe; on the contrary, it interprets the country's geographic location as grounds for choosing a messianic 'third way'. This doctrine is attractive to many Russian politicians because it helps them formulate an explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union and to restore a sense of Russia's continuity from its troubled past 'by recasting it in spatial rather than temporal terms'.¹² In particular, the Eurasianists want to put an end to the post-Soviet elites' mimicry of the West and to condemn the failure of communism as the end of a European idea.

Neo-Eurasianism has found its place within the new patriotic doctrine of Putin's Russia, and the main proponent of the new geopolitical right-wing is Alexander Dugin, who opposes US globalisation and describes his geopolitical doctrines as sacred geography (*sacral'naia geografiia*). In his book, *Last War of the World Island*, Dugin argues for Russia's return to its geopolitical function as the continental Heartland—a concept

11 Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, DC, 2008, p. 1.

12 Ibid.

he deliberately copies from Halford Mackinder.¹³ He identifies Russia as a 'Civilisation of Land' and believes that Russia's occupation of the Heartland is the land-based (*telluric*) core of the entire Eurasian continent in what he describes as its unchanging geopolitical spatial sense (*raumsinn*). Dugin proclaims that Russia 'is doomed to conflict' with the Civilisation of the Sea (*thalassic*) embodied today in the United States and the unipolar America-centric world order.¹⁴ It should be noted that his books are assigned as textbooks at the General Staff Academy and other military universities in Russia.

How influential is Dugin? Laruelle believes he can be considered to represent the general evolution of the Russian nationalist milieu over the past two decades; she says he is one of the few thinkers to engage in a profound renewal of Russian nationalist doctrines.¹⁵ Mackinder's concept of the Heartland was quoted approvingly in 2009 by Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council and former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), which was the first time that this vocabulary had emerged in public at such a senior level.¹⁶ In 2013, Putin himself endorsed the Eurasian idea when he said that 'Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia'.¹⁷ In May 2015, the treaty creating Putin's 'Eurasian Union' was signed in the Kazakh capital, Astana, with Kazakhstan and Belarus as members.¹⁸ Thus, Eurasia has become the officially sanctioned national idea of Russia, articulated by its head of state. It matches Dugin's prognostication that Russia is different and unique and that, as it is under attack from the West, it must seek geopolitical strength in the Heartland.

13 Alexander Dugin, *Last War of the World Island: The Geopolitics of Contemporary Russia*, Arktos, London, 2015, p. 135.

14 Ibid., p. 10.

15 Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, pp. 141 and 143.

16 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016, pp. 295–6.

17 Ibid., pp. 316–17.

18 Ibid., p. 330.

China's territorial ambitions

Unlike Russia, China has not yet used direct military power to assert its territorial claims, but it is using such harsh coercion that—like Russia—it is causing extreme apprehension in its neighbourhood. China continues to assert the right to use military force to recover Taiwan and has built up powerful military forces opposite Taiwan specifically designed to retake the island. The key unknown is when will Beijing lose patience with the waiting process and judge that Washington lacks the fortitude to go to war with China over Taiwan. The Pentagon's latest report to Congress makes it clear that China continues to focus on preparing for potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait and that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is developing and deploying military capabilities intended to coerce Taiwan or to attempt an invasion, if necessary.¹⁹ However, the Pentagon report also observes that large-scale amphibious invasion is one of the most complicated and difficult military operations and that an attempt to invade Taiwan would strain China's armed forces and 'invite international intervention'.²⁰

China's territorial ambitions in the South and East China seas have been pursued with great belligerence in recent years, and they are the most likely source of miscalculation leading to direct military conflict with the United States and its allies. China is heavily dependent upon unhindered maritime traffic through the South China Sea, through which one-third of the world's trade and 80 per cent of China's oil imports pass. What President Xi Jinping terms China's 'Malacca dilemma' has led him to propose a geopolitical alternative called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), which would see more secure Chinese transportation routes across the Indian Ocean—as well as through Central Asia—and avoid the strategic bottlenecks of South-East Asia. OBOR aims to replicate the domestic success of Chinese state capitalism over the last 25 years on a Eurasian continental scale.²¹ But it will take decades to implement and will face resistance to the heavy-handed way in which Beijing typically operates in foreign countries.

19 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, Washington, DC, April 2016, p. 87.

20 Ibid., p. 89.

21 Christian Darnat, 'China's shifting geo-economic strategy', *Survival* 58, no. 3, 2016, p. 71.

Like Russia, China is a continental power with little historical experience of being a maritime power. Robert Ross has argued that China's maritime power will be limited by the constraints experienced by all land powers, including the geopolitical sources of the repeated failure of land powers to secure maritime power.²² His main thesis is that land powers confront internal threats that impose severe resource constraints in developing maritime power, whereas the geographic circumstances of maritime powers offer enduring border security and ready access to the sea. It is a telling point, in this regard, that China spends as much on internal security as it does on its defence build-up. In the Cold War, another land power, the Soviet Union, practised the same sort of access denial capability to reduce the challenge of US carrier-based aircraft to its territorial security that China is now implementing. But China has a surface fleet without organic airpower and nuclear-powered submarines that remain relatively noisy. Its land-based air capabilities are insufficient to enable China to project decisive power in even the relatively near waters of maritime East Asia. China is not yet capable of successfully challenging US dominance of regional sea lanes or the security of the United States' allies in East Asia.²³ As the *Economist* observes, China needs Western markets; its neighbours are unwilling to accept its regional writ, and for many more years the United States will be strong enough militarily and diplomatically to block it.²⁴

But that is by no means all the story about China's territorial ambitions. It has played its cards craftily in the South China Sea by undertaking land reclamation, building infrastructure and introducing habitation on an incremental basis while at the same time avoiding the direct use of military force. It has persistently lied about not militarising these islands, rocks and reefs. China does all this while asserting that it has 'indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and adjacent waters and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof'.²⁵ On 12 July 2016, however, the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration rebuffed Beijing in a clear-cut ruling that concluded there was no legal basis for China's claims regarding resources falling within the nine-dashed line and, moreover, that none

22 Robert S. Ross, 'China's naval nationalism', *International Security* 34, no. 2, 2009, p. 47.

23 Paul Dibb and John Lee, 'Why China will not become the dominant power in Asia', *Security Challenges* 10, no. 3, 2014, p. 18.

24 'What China wants', *Economist* 412, no. 8901, 2014, p. 9.

25 Note Verbale to the United Nations Secretary-General, May 2009, quoted in *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, July 2015, p. 8.

of the Chinese-occupied features in the Spratly chain could be classified as islands.²⁶ This delivered a stinging rebuke to China. As might be expected, Beijing responded by rejecting the jurisdiction of the court as being ‘null and void, with no binding force’.²⁷ Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin was reported as proclaiming that China reserved the right to declare an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the entire South China Sea, and President Xi Jinping told visiting EU leaders Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker that China’s interest in the South China Sea would ‘in no circumstances be affected’ by the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. He stated that ‘[t]he South China Sea Islands have been China’s territory since ancient times’ and that ‘[w]e refuse to accept any claims or activities based on the arbitral ruling’.²⁸ He said China was committed to settling through direct talks the disputes with fellow claimants Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei, as well as the Philippines. In fact, Beijing has strung along the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) claimants for the last 14 years while supposedly negotiating a code of conduct in the South China Sea. So, while China claims it remains committed to resolving the relevant disputes through negotiation and consultation with the countries directly concerned ‘on the basis of respecting historical facts’, there can be no expectation of any resolution of this potentially dangerous territorial stand-off.

Tensions now seem likely to rise, but it remains to be seen what Beijing’s next steps will be. Australia’s former Ambassador to China believes that in the end all that is left is diplomacy and that negotiation between claimant states is the only path towards some sort of resolution.²⁹ At the same time, he recognises that China’s leaders are now under enormous popular pressure to be seen to be standing up for China’s territorial sovereignty. Any sign of weakness in the face of what will be seen widely in China as a national humiliation will provide a legitimate opening to attack Xi Jinping. Beijing could respond belligerently to the arbitral finding by more aggressively building and militarising various structures, moving more oil exploration and drilling platforms into the area, and increasing

26 Jane Perlez, ‘Tribunal rejects Beijing’s claims within South China Sea’, *New York Times*, 12 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/asia/south-china-sea-hague-ruling-philippines.html (retrieved 21 January 2018).

27 Jingye Cheng, ‘Arbitration on South China Sea dispute fatally flawed’, *Australian*, 14 July 2016, p. 12.

28 An Baijie and Fu Jing, ‘Ruling “null and void”, with no binding force’, *China Daily USA*, 13 July 2016, usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2016-07/13/content_26073364.htm (retrieved 26 August 2017).

29 Geoff Raby, ‘It’s impossible for Xi Jinping to give in to ‘The Hague’’, *Australian Financial Review*, 14 July 2016, p. 47.

its harassment of fishing boats from other claimant states.³⁰ But the fact is that there is now a much greater chance of miscalculation or an accidental military confrontation. There are those who believe that China and the United States are now so intertwined economically that military conflict is out of the question and that now is the time for restraint. That might be true, but in my view the time has come when the United States and its allies—including Australia—will have to demonstrate to China that it cannot make unilateral territorial land grabs. That will involve us undertaking deliberate freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and conducting regular intrusive aerial surveillance.

There is one final Chinese territorial proposal that I need to address. In various regional forums, including my involvement on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) with the ASEAN Regional Forum, China is pushing the idea of the need for a comprehensive review of the regional security architecture. This includes examining the rationale for and ingredients of a new security order for the region at a time of major rebalancing between rising and established powers.³¹ The idea here is to revisit the existing security order critically, including the system of bilateral alliances. This is, of course, a ploy by China—supported by Russia—to get rid of the US alliance system as relics of the Cold War. It is a dangerous proposition because the collapse of the US alliance system would inevitably lead to a nuclear-armed Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, which would be against China's national interests. Another concern is the argument of those who demand that the United States make strategic space for a rising China.³²

It is not clear what is being proposed here: is it handing over a democratic Taiwan, and is the idea also to concede ownership of the South China Sea to Beijing? The central geopolitical question here for Australia is whether Beijing is aiming for a sphere of influence over South-East Asia as a collection of small countries effectively having subordinate status.³³ If that occurred, it would face Australia with a potentially hostile power based in its neighbourhood.

30 Ibid.

31 I represented Australia at the ninth meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum Expert and Eminent Persons meeting in Helsinki, Finland, on 12–13 March 2015, where this issue was canvassed and rejected.

32 Hugh White, *The China Choice*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2012.

33 Former People's Republic of China Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated at a July 2010 meeting with ASEAN, 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact'. John Pomfret, 'US takes a tougher tone with China', *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html (retrieved 20 January 2018).

Australia's new strategic geography

The United States' 'pivot' to Asia, mainly to counter China's rise in the region, has made Australia's geographical location much more important than it was in the Cold War. In the Cold War, Australia was distant from the main theatres of military confrontation in Europe and North-East Asia. Its main strategic relevance to the United States was as 'a suitable piece of real estate', as Des Ball described it, for the location in central Australia of some of the United States' most potent intelligence collection facilities at Pine Gap and Nurrungar. Australia also conducted covert submarine intelligence operations against the Soviet Navy, as well as tracking Soviet nuclear submarines with P3 Orion reconnaissance aircraft. Now, however, Australia is critically located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and relatively near South-East Asia and the South China Sea flashpoint. Former Defence Minister Kim Beazley has pointed out the relevance of Australia's secure location for the United States in the southern hemisphere. Unlike US military forces stationed in Japan, South Korea and Guam, the south of Australia is not within range of China's anti-access/area denial conventional weapons. Australia can offer the United States access to naval harbours and military airfields in the west and north of Australia so that it can project power into the eastern Indian Ocean and South-East Asian waters. The United States is increasing its footprint in Australia as part of its 'rebalance' to Asia. Australia's northern military facilities already host on-rotation elements of a US Marine Air-Ground Task Force of up to 2,500 personnel as well as the deployment of B-52 bombers to Darwin.

Australia should stand ready to provide more assistance to the US military given the growing strategic importance of and uncertain outlook in the region to our north. As already mentioned, South-East Asia is of critical importance to Australia's security: it is a shield to Australia's sparsely populated and resource-rich northern approaches. Australia would be concerned about the threat of a foreign military power seeking influence in South-East Asia in ways that could challenge the security of our maritime approaches. Such a military presence or lodgement has long been a concern in Australian defence planning.

The 2016 *Defence White Paper* reflects serious concern in Canberra about China's worrying military build-up and its flaunting of the established rules-based international order. In fact, the White Paper mentions Australia's strong support for the 'rules-based global order' 54 times in a scarcely concealed allusion to the People's Republic of China. It stresses that 'the rules-based order is under increasing pressure and has shown signs of fragility'.³⁴ However, although Russia and North Korea are cited specifically as being guilty of refusal to act in ways consistent with international law and standards of behaviour, China is mentioned only obliquely along the lines that 'newly powerful countries want greater influence', but they also 'have a responsibility to act in a way that constructively contributes to global stability, security and prosperity'.³⁵ The White Paper does not contain more direct criticism of China's repeated flaunting of international order and stability in the region. There is, however, a specific mention of China's activities in the South China Sea, where it is stated that 'Australia is particularly concerned by the unprecedented pace and scale of China's land reclamation activities'.³⁶ Predictably, this provoked an outraged response from Beijing.

The White Paper observes that Australia can expect greater uncertainty in its strategic environment over the next two decades as a consequence *inter alia* of 'changes in the distribution of power' in the Indo-Pacific and 'the modernisation of regional military capabilities'.³⁷ It states that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) must be better prepared to meet a broader range of security challenges in the coming years.³⁸ Maintaining Australia's technological edge and capability superiority over potential adversaries has been an essential element of our strategic planning now for more than 30 years, but the White Paper observes that Australia's capability superiority in future will be challenged by military modernisation in the region.³⁹ Classified concerns about China's military build-up and its continuing provocations in the South China Sea caused the Defence

34 Australian Government, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Department of Defence, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016, p. 45, www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf (retrieved 16 January 2018).

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p. 58.

37 Ibid., p. 32.

38 Ibid., p. 34.

39 Ibid., p. 16.

White Paper to elevate the security of South-East Asia to Australia's most important strategic interest after the defence of Australia and our northern approaches. The White Paper states:

The geography of the archipelago to Australia's immediate north will always have particular significance to our security. Any conventional military threat to Australia is likely to approach through the archipelago.⁴⁰

It goes on to say: 'Proximity and economic interests mean that instability in South-East Asia, whether internal to countries or between countries, has the potential to affect Australia's security',⁴¹ and it observes that '[a]s our near neighbour, Australia's relationship with Indonesia is vital'.⁴²

In addition to its heavy focus on maritime South-East Asia, the Defence White Paper revisits the importance of Australia's military facilities in the north and west of the continent—some of which have been ignored and run down over recent years. The White Paper states that while there is no more than a remote chance of a military attack on Australian territory by another country, Australians rightly expect that our armed forces be capable of the self-reliant defence of our territory from attack or coercion by another country.⁴³ Therefore, the government has committed itself to providing defence with 'the capability it needs to be able to decisively respond to military threats to Australia, including incursions into our air, sea and northern approaches'.⁴⁴ Investment in Australia's northern military bases will now be increased substantially so that they can support new capabilities that will be used to defeat any attack on our territory. Investment in Australia's national defence infrastructure will include the army, navy and air force bases in northern Australia, including in Townsville and Darwin as well as the air force bases in Tindal, Curtin, Scherger and Learmonth.⁴⁵ This will enhance infrastructure in northern Australia to support the ADF's strike and air combat capabilities, including Joint Strike Fighters, Wedgetail airborne early warning and control aircraft, and air-to-air refuellers.⁴⁶ The Jindalee over-the-horizon radar (OTHR) radar network and other surveillance, space and air defence-related facilities in

40 Ibid., p. 56.

41 Ibid., p. 57.

42 Ibid., p. 59.

43 Ibid., p. 71. An entire section of the *2016 Defence White Paper* is devoted to northern Australia (pp. 103–4).

44 Ibid., p. 72.

45 Ibid., p. 72.

46 Ibid., p. 103.

northern Australia will be upgraded over the next decade.⁴⁷ There is also a commitment to upgrade the infrastructure on Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the eastern Indian Ocean to support flights by the new P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft.⁴⁸ The White Paper states that Australia's maritime forces will become more potent through the acquisition of more capable submarines, ships and aircraft so that these forces will help to protect Australia's maritime borders, secure our immediate northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication, and enable Australia to project force in the maritime environment—especially our trade routes through the South China Sea through which nearly two-thirds of our exports pass.⁴⁹

All this amounts to a significant geographical refocusing of the ADF, which has been preoccupied over the last 15 years with almost continuous deployments to the Middle East and Afghanistan. The current geographical refocus on maritime South-East Asia and the complementary upgrading of military bases in the north of Australia, after years of lack of attention, marks a triumphant return of geography to Australia's defence planning.

47 Ibid., p. 104.

48 Ibid., p. 103.

49 Ibid., pp. 89–90 and 57.

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