

As the world changes around us, we're looking like strategic amateurs

By **Peter Leahy**

The Australian, 27 January 2018

Link: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/as-the-world-changes-around-us-were-looking-like-strategic-amateurs/news-story/58ab0a5f9f97a07c6028f5931592b28b>

Momentous change is afoot in global affairs. Amid this change Australia and its allies will find it increasingly difficult to navigate a path that ensures the type of security and prosperity we have enjoyed over the previous few decades.

As if terrorism wasn't enough, the US Defence Secretary James Mattis, in unveiling a new defence strategy, spoke of great-power competition and said that countering China's expanding military and Russian aggressiveness was now the main focus of America's national security approach.

China's new confidence and assertiveness was highlighted in Xi Jinping's speech at the Communist Party's quinquennial congress. He spoke of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era in which China will move closer to centre stage and make greater contributions to mankind.

Countering this new Chinese assertiveness, Japan, the US, India and Australia contemplate a reconvened regional security grouping that can only have at its core the intent of containing China.

Echoing the new American security focus, the British Army chief, General Nick Carter, declared Russia was the biggest state-based threat to the UK since the Cold War.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un trade schoolyard names with each other while their two countries contemplate nuclear war.

The Middle East and parts of Africa remain a mess. Radical Islamists endure as a constant threat and there is an increasingly obvious and violent Sunni versus Shia proxy war being played out in Yemen and Lebanon.

What to make of Turkey, once a moderate NATO partner, and its current hostility to the Kurds? Turkey is moving closer to Iran and Russia and is attacking Kurdish groups allied to the US in Syria.

As well as security, economic and military competition, we are engaged in an underlying global struggle to determine the political, ideological and theological

nature of our world: China — communism tending to socialism; Islamists — seeking a global caliphate under sharia law; widespread authoritarianism in Africa and the Middle East; and then the rest, including us — mostly secular democracies of varied success and stability.

We should be confident that democracy is the best system and that as countries such as China develop, rather than socialism with Chinese characteristics they will settle on democracy with Chinese characteristics.

However, China's growth, increasing soft power and recent strategic initiatives have left us wondering what to do next: South China Sea — didn't see that one coming; Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank — we were slow and less than enthusiastic to become involved; Belt and Road Initiative — we are not even in the race. We look like strategic amateurs.

We would be wise to maintain a strong working relationship with China. This will not be easy as, at times, we seem to be intent on alienating the Chinese. We might not agree with all they are doing but they are an indispensable part of our economic and diplomatic future. There is nothing inherently wrong with a more powerful China and we need to be careful of making a future we don't want.

China is certainly developing sophisticated military capabilities, but how will it use them? Many of its new capabilities are defensive. The names "area denial" and "anti-access" tell us this much.

China is not only an emerging power; it is powerful now. We are right to be robust in our approach but there are limits to how robust we can be. Co-operation and competition rather than containment should be the dominant themes of our relationship. Instead of searching out differences, let's look to commonalities. Three examples stand out: economic dependency, the fight against terror and restraining North Korea.

While we don't want to make a choice between our economic and security futures, it is conceivable that we might have to. Any such decision should be our choice alone and we need to have the confidence and ability to be able to make independent sovereign assessments and decisions.

Australia's relationship with America is of enormous benefit and the US is undoubtedly a force for good in the world. But we should not assume that our national interests will always coincide.

When considering our relationship with the US, what are we to make of the prospect of a hard-nosed warrior admiral, rather than a diplomat, as the next American ambassador to Australia?

The world might be changing but geography has not become irrelevant. The things closer to us are the most important. This means we should focus on the

Indo-Pacific region and, where possible, seize any opportunity to draw down our commitments to the Middle East.

When focusing on our region, Indonesia is a very good place to start. A strong, close and productive engagement with Indonesia would be good for regional security and could well serve as a hedge against a range of future problems with China.

Peter Leahy is the director of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra and was chief of army from 2002 to 2008. He is a member of the China Matters Advisory Council.