

Politicians and politics are the enemy of strategy

By Peter Leahy

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As a nation we don't know what we want in foreign affairs, how to achieve it or how much to spend on getting it.

Australia is a strategy-free zone. We might talk about national security strategies, military strategies, economic strategies, diplomatic strategies, climate strategies and information strategies.

However, we seldom deliver a workable strategy. As a nation we are in strategic deficit and it is hurting us.

The evidence:

- The obscene gap between Department of Foreign Affairs White Papers – 2003 to 2017.
- The almost surreal strategy to acquire new submarines.
- The absence of realistic energy and climate strategies.

At a time when a cyber war is raging and the skirmishes in a space war have begun, we have no clear idea on how to proceed.

China has left us wallowing in their strategic wake. Look at their activities in the South China Sea, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road initiative and in Antarctica.

Australian forces remain in both Afghanistan and Iraq after 18 and 16 years respectively. Some might call this strategic continuity. Rubbish. Following the US on a mission of revenge was never an adequate strategy. We are hapless onlookers in the Middle East. It's time to come home and begin to do something constructive in our region and build an independent future for ourselves.

In the now vanished National Security Strategy of 2013 Prime Minister Julia Gillard attempted to define the links between; what we want (ends), what we are doing to achieve it (ways), and what resources we have to dedicate to the task (means).

Australia has failed to make this equation work and produce proper strategies. We don't know what we want, we don't have the adaptability or imagination to determine the approach and our resources are limited.

Starting point

Right now, we seem to want everything and there is no mechanism to determine what our priorities are. As a result, we are not doing anything well. Our politicians need to think and act strategically.

We can't have everything so the starting point should be a serious discussion on who we are as a nation and what we stand for. What are our values, interests and objectives? We also need to consider if there are any things we don't want and won't accept? In the extreme, what are the red lines – what are we prepared to fight for?

This is not an esoteric discussion. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, said in January: "Taiwan must and will be united with China", "foreign interference is intolerable" and Beijing "reserves the option of taking 'all necessary measures' against outside forces that interfere...".

In the context of an increasingly authoritarian, confident and technologically advanced China, the big strategic question is, what does Australia want, security or prosperity? Do we have to choose, or can Australia have both?

Our politicians are failing us by not prompting this discussion.

If we decide to go with China and prosperity will America rescind the ANZUS treaty, our long-imagined security guarantee?

If we decide to go with America and security, will China restrict access to its economy?

What do we do if China attacks Taiwan and America responds with military force?

Self-appointed mission

In Washington, the neocons have returned. Their self-appointed mission is to limit China and Iran. At worst they are seeking to crush both countries and at best deny them strategic space. There is talk of de-coupling from China. Australia will be expected to follow the US lead.

At the same time authoritarian rulers and religious and secular fundamentalists have shattered the boundaries of domestic and international norms. They have weaponised the internet and social media sites. The effect is to undermine the political processes and cohesion of nations.

Dealing with each one of these issues is worthy of a strategic approach and a strategy.

However, in Australia there is no sense of urgency in either having a discussion or developing and implementing real strategies.

Undermining national cohesion

It is high time we thought strategically. It must be founded on the question of what we want and what brings us together.

While I have no real issue with identity politics, my concern is that there are too many identities and they are undermining national cohesion. As a nation we seem intent on finding things that will drive us apart rather than things that will bring us together.

We need to be clear eyed and consistent about who we are and what we want to be. We need to be proud of being Australians and we need leadership.

Only then can we begin to be strategic and begin to fill our strategic void.

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