

Australia's diplomacy needs more talk, less chest beating

John McCarthy AO

The anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine gives us pause to reflect on recent global shifts which affect our security.

The first shift is unsurprising: the growth of strategic competition and accompanying tensions in the two main theatres, the North Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.

The Ukraine war has broken what little trust existed between Russia and the West. Even if a ceasefire is achieved, Europe will be uneasy for decades.

Chinese assertiveness over the past five years has raised the temperature in the Indo-Pacific. Tensions about Taiwan have been central.

The United States has veered from a policy of ambiguity about whether it would defend Taiwan. Some Republican leaders have also questioned the One China Policy - regarded as a sacrosanct pillar of western approaches on China.

To quote a seasoned Singaporean observer, Chan Heng Chee, in The Straits Times on 21 February, "The Chinese are coming to the position that the United States is in reality pursuing a One China, One Taiwan policy".

Chinese policies in East Asia over the past five years or so and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have also stimulated in Japan a new strategic boldness.

The second shift is that developments in each of the theatres of strategic competition have increasingly impacted on the other.

The "no limits" description of the partnership agreed between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Putin on 4 February last year may be hype. But the partnership has helped Russia manage the costs of the war. And while the Americans can cope with strategic competition in two theatres at once, it is to China's advantage to have American political energy and resources focussed more on Europe and less on the Indo-Pacific.

And because of its relationship with Russia, China has leverage in any peace process which might develop in Europe. This gives it global clout. It has yet to successfully exploit this capacity. President Xi's 12-point peace initiative of 25 February might not in itself get far. But it could be the first stage in a more active Chinese diplomatic role on Ukraine.

And aspects of China's Ukraine policy may have direct relevance to the Indo-Pacific. One of India's foremost experts on negotiating with China, former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, wrote in the Indian publication The Tribune on 21 February that "China may well be trying to link its restraint on supplying lethal materials to Russia to American restraint on weapons supplies to Taiwan".

The Europeans have also expanded their strategic reach into the Indo-Pacific. The French have always been here. The British are in AUKUS - even if as much because of the politics of Brexit as because of their strategic interests. Others such as the Germans have also been more visible in our region. Going in the other direction, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand attended last year's NATO summit and will likely attend the 2023 meeting.

The third shift has been the revival of the "Global South".

At the G20 meeting in Jakarta in November 2022, the actual and future Chairs, Indonesia and India, lobbied successfully for a declaration that most members "strongly condemned" the war in Ukraine. True, both countries were probably acting less from altruism than to keep the G20 as a going concern, particularly on their watch. But they did it.

And on 24 February this year, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which called for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine. It was carried by 141-7 with 32 abstaining. All good.

That said, the developing world is generally averse to sanctions policies and largely sees the Ukraine war as a European affair - one which has proved expensive for them as well as for the combatants and their supporters.

In January this year, Indian Prime Minister Modi hosted a virtual summit of leaders of the Global South - essentially the same grouping with the same objectives as the UN Group of 77 (now 134) developing countries. Much of the discussion was about handling of the global economic issues arising from Covid and from the Ukraine war.

Some of the Global South have also talked of the revival of the Non-Aligned Movement representing those who supposedly did not take sides in the Cold War.

In a recent interview with Nikkei Asia, the Indonesian Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, the most accomplished member of the Indonesian Cabinet, spoke of the importance of working closely with India to bolster the role of the Global South in world affairs.

What then should Australia do?

First, the growth in tensions in both major global theatres - but particularly in the Indo-Pacific - means that, some individual decisions aside, the government has correctly put heft into that aspect of security policy which encompasses deterrence and combat-readiness, namely relevant alliances and military arrangements and money for weapons and personnel.

But despite the obvious acumen of the Foreign Minister, Ms Wong, the government has been less visibly active in pursuing the second - and equally crucial - aspect of security policy, namely working with others to diminish the risk of hostilities.

Part of the problem is that Australian political style and the maw of much of the Australian media more readily embraces the first aspect. This means that for those on the receiving end of our policy, the muscular side dominates. The perception of our policy can then become the reality. We should seek to redress this imbalance. Less chest beating, more talking.

Second, we have been right in recent decades to channel our diplomatic energy and resources into the region, both Asia and the Pacific. However, the impact of developments in each of the two main strategic theatres on the other has thrown into relief that we need to put more diplomatic grunt into Europe.

Finally, the revival of the Global South should remind us of three things: many of the countries which we seek most to influence (e.g. in the Pacific) are in the Global South; Australia cannot afford periodically to walk from multilateral diplomacy as Coalition governments have tended to do; and the attention we give Africa, Latin America and the Middle East needs enhancement.



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