

THE NORTH – A GLOBAL STRATEGIC ASSET IN EVERY DOMAIN

SLIDE 1

Good Afternoon. I am honored to have been asked to talk about Strategic Geography ahead of the next panel. Hold on to your seats, because in 10 minutes I am going to open the discussion on the Geostrategic importance of Darwin and Northern Australia in the Indo-Pacific.

- In February 2020 I had the privilege of presenting at the ADM Congress in Canberra.
- The good news is that what I said then was accurate.
- The bad news is I underestimated the proximity of the challenge.

SLIDE 2

Since 2020, things have only gotten worse in terms of the challenge, and that challenge is China. Things have only become more dire in terms of the need for maximizing the strategic opportunities available to Australia, her Allies, and partners.

Wikipedia defines Strategic Geography as those aspects of geography concerned with the **“control of, or access to, and spatial areas that affect the security and prosperity of nations. Spatial areas that concern strategic geography change with human needs and development...”**

The importance of strategic geography has never been more important and the rapidly changing “spatial areas” that make up strategic geography have placed the North of Australia as the locus of opportunity in curbing Chinese aggression and shaping a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

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This rapid pace of change and the timing of critical events in the Indo-Pacific have created a strategic inflection point for the Indo-Pacific and the Australian North.

The rapidly accelerating aggressive dynamic of Chinese influence throughout the Indo-Pacific and the significant advances in the technologies that support both the security and prosperity of nations have created a rapidly changing definition, or perhaps better stated, **a rapidly changing composition of strategic geography**.

While the traditional three-dimensional view of geography as air, land, and sea still applies, all definitions, and thus strategic orientation, must now be expanded to include space and cyberspace as well as the traditional dimensions.

Viewed through this lens, all elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) can be placed at risk by an increasingly aggressive China.

Challenges for dominance in every element of national power and across all five domains – is being fueled by two great powers, Russia, and China. Of the two, China is without peer in the Indo-Pacific in their efforts to become a regional, if not global hegemon. The left-hand graphic highlights China's Five Island Chain Strategic Vision of the Indo-Pacific.

- China's vision for the future is based on a sense of destiny they refer to as "The China Dream," otherwise known as "National Rejuvenation by 2049" ...the 100-year anniversary of the founding of the Communist state...however, the five principles attributed to this document no longer apply.
 - mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity,
 - mutual non-aggression,

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- non-interference in each other's internal affairs,
- equality and mutual benefit, and
- peaceful coexistence

- As an example, China's military militarization of the South China Sea
 - Reclaimed and militarized more than 3,000 dredged up acres across numerous features that are now studded with long-range sensor arrays, port facilities, runways, weapons systems, and reinforced bunkers for fuel.

 - They are creating strategic geography of their own.

- The buildup of the Peoples Liberation Navy is a good benchmark for China's design in the region.
 - In 2020, a good estimate of just the PLAN's blue water capability in 2035 was expected to be around 262 warships."
 - At that time China had 232 TIMES the US SHIPBUILDING CAPACITY
 - Now, in 2024, the expectation is that China will have 425 warships by 2030, not 262 by 2035
 - Their growth in submarines is even more remarkable. GROWTH FROM 65 SUBMARINES IN 2025 TO 80 SUBMARINES IN 2035

- The build-up of the People's Liberation Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the development of multiple long-range land-based missiles with the ranges shown on the right graphic, when added to their cyber threats, and anti-satellite weapons, are indicators of China's assertive foreign policy shift well beyond their own borders.

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As you can see on this slide, Australia sits at the intersection of the strategic geography of the region. A view that has grown in the eyes of many global security experts to be China's five "island chains," not the two or three island chains most frequently discussed.

The strategic Geography of Australia, and particularly the Northern Territory and Darwin, is key to being close enough to make a difference, and far enough away to be resilient.

SLIDE 3

Given the 5-dimensional definition of strategic geography, the North, and specifically Darwin is a critical global platform from which Australia can deter, and if required, contribute to the defeat of Chinese expansionism.

The response to China – our bid for success if you will in these turbulent times now and in the future – is a partnership between the US, Australia, and other allies and partners.

The global platform allows Australia, her Allies, and her partners, to support all elements of national power, and to do it in all five domains.

But what does that mean. It means providing the ability to

- create capabilities, be they raw materials
 - such as critical minerals or strategic fuels.
- It means the ability to
 - create industrial might,
 - create trained coalition forces,
 - and digitally connect forces that can go toe to toe in a nation state conflict with China.

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- It means providing capabilities in all five domains and connecting them across all allies and partners.
- It means launching force capabilities in all five domains,
- and it means providing the maintenance and sustainability necessary across the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific.

Australia possesses the capability to effectively train, sustain, and coordinate allied and partner nation military forces

- far enough away from direct Chinese influence,
- but close enough to impact Chinese actions in the region.

How will this be done?

- By growing state of the art Live, virtual and constructive ranges;
- improving port facilities;
- growing high-speed, reduced latency, secure communications and data capabilities;
- building ever increasing cyber capabilities and partnerships;
- expanding an ever growing space capability;
- and a growing a coalition industrial base through AUKUS Pillar II and other agreements, that supports
 - critical minerals,
 - strategic fuels,
 - and multiple other products vital to the industrial base.

By doing this the Australian North becomes a key global platform that takes advantage of its inherent strategic geography.

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Improved maritime support capabilities and port facilities, as well as a supporting coalition industrial base, will better support surface and subsurface, manned and unmanned platforms.

Improved and redundant communications backbones will support live, virtual, and constructive training development that will revolutionize allied and partner capabilities across the region.

Finally, a growing space capability will provide for partnered efforts in the space domain and highlight the growing partnerships in space across the region.

The sum of these capabilities will provide for basing options and future commitments to the Indo-Pacific, as well as support other ally and partner interests in shared development in all five domains.

SLIDE 4

In the end, Darwin and the North of Australia provides an ideal hedge against the potential strategic vulnerabilities of not only Australia, but of all nations committed to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

- There is no doubt we are in an unparalleled period of change.
- The understanding of strategic geography must be agile and adaptive through the lenses of
 - rapidly changing technology,
 - human needs,
 - and national development in the region.

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Charles Darwin said, **“It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.”**

In this time of dynamic change, it is, in Rugby terms, time to “go for the gap” and capitalize on the opportunities provided by the North’s strategic geography. It is time to treat the North not only as a Critical Global Platform, but through investment as a vital Global Strategic Asset.

- The map shown on the right is truly worth a thousand words. It is the view of Australia from China. The Chinese have taken the long view. They know that strategic geography matters.
- Strategic Geography matters –
- presence in all five domains matters –
- virtual presence is actual absence –
- time and proximity matter in being able to consistently apply the elements of national power across all five domains and build relationships and partnerships that have lasting strategic importance.

The geostrategic importance of Darwin and the Australian North is their presence, presence at the center, now and in the future, of strategic geography.