

GEOSTRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC – THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE NORTH

SLIDE 1

Good morning. I am honored to have been asked to talk about Geostrategic Landscape in the Indo-Pacific and the critical role for Northern Australia. Hold on to your seats, because in 20 minutes I am going to set ground truth for an accelerating competition among nation states.

- In May of last year I had the privilege of presenting at this same conference.
- The good news is that what I said then has proven accurate.
- The bad news is I underestimated the velocity of change regarding the challenge.

SLIDE 2

Since last year, things have only gotten worse in terms of the challenge, and that primary challenge is China. However, since the last year, Russia and North Korea have joined in the mix of Nation State challenges. Things have only become more dire in terms of the need for maximizing the strategic opportunities available to Australia, her Allies, and partners.

Let's start with a definition of Geostrategy.

Geostrategy, a subfield of geopolitics, is the application of strategic thinking based on geographical factors, particularly in the context of international relations and foreign policy. It involves understanding how

- geographical location,
- resources,
- and terrain

can influence a nation's

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- foreign policy decisions,
- military planning,
- and overall power projection.

Challenges for dominance in every element of national power and across all five domains – is being fueled by two great powers, Russia, and China, and a third critical influencer, North Korea. Of the two, China is without peer in the Indo-Pacific in their efforts to become a regional, if not global hegemon. The right - 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,
 - non-interference in each other's internal affairs,
 - equality and mutual benefit, and
 - peaceful coexistence
- As an example, President Xi has stated every element of the PLA must be combat ready by 2027. Their training is no longer training, but now rehearsals for future combat operations.
- The buildup of the Peoples Liberation Navy is a good benchmark for China's design in the region.

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- 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, and it has retained, if not increased that advantage.
- In 2024, the expectation was 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.

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 Geostrategic importance of Australia, and particularly the Northern Territory and Darwin, is key.

Darwin is close enough to make a difference, and far enough away to be resilient.

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

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, and thus a rapidly changing impact to geostrategy.**

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.

SLIDE 4

This slide is an example of China’s commitment to rehearsal vice training. The actions identified on this slide were conducted on 1 and 2 April of this year. This is not training...this is integrated rehearsal and included other efforts in all five domains.

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SLIDE 5

To drive things a bit closer to home, I believe everyone in this room remembers the events of 19 February 2025. Note the track of the Chinese warships. This alone highlights the criticality of the Australian North. Also of note was the Chinese “live fire training.” This is not training...this is a rehearsal done to determine the reactions by the other nation state.

SLIDE 6

This slide highlights the concerns of the man I would offer who is most focused on the Indo-Pacific region. ADM Paparo, commander of the US INDOPACOM made these comments in his recent testimony before the US House of Representatives.

Note the critical issues:

- China is developing critical technologies and outpacing the US
- China is increased military pressure on Taiwan by 300% in 2024
- Russia’s growing capability and influence in the Pacific is significant
- The increasing coordination between Russia, China, and North Korea has added another unique layer of complexity.

These are fundamental shifts – I would offer in a most dangerous direction – of the geostrategy in the Indo-Pacific. All of this highlights the increased importance of the North of Australia.

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SLIDE 7

This slide reinforces the importance of Australia for the US, and I would offer the entirety of like minded Nations in the Indo-Pacific.

This slide also lays out and highlights an effective counter to the growing influence of China, Russia and North Korea. But the effective counter can only be achieved with action. **A vision without resources is a hallucination!** It's time for an increased commitment of resources in the North, and all indications are that the US and others see the need for that commitment.

SLIDE 8

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, Russia, and North Korea – 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,

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- and digitally connect forces that can go toe to toe in a nation state conflict with China.
- 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 prepositioning, 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?

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- 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.

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By doing this the Australian North becomes a key global platform that takes advantage of its inherent importance to geostrategy.

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 10

In the end, Darwin and the North of Australia provides an ideal hedge against the **potential geostrategic 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.

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 Geostrategic 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 and geostrategy matters**.

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The geostrategic importance of Darwin and the Australian North is their presence, presence at the center, now and in the future, of geostrategy in the entire region.