Aiding our ally...some options for Australia

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Introduction
The Indo-Pacific regional order is under significant strain. The relative influence of the United States is in decline and an increasingly assertive China is leveraging its economic rise and growing military capabilities to challenge existing norms and impose its own rules as the new regional hegemon. President Xi has openly stated the US-led security architecture and order has ‘outlived its utility’ in stabilising the region and is actively promoting China as an alternative to US leadership. On the other hand, the US has yet to implement an effective strategic response that closes the gap between its ‘ends and means’ in addressing China’s rise. For decades the US has relied on naval mastery of the maritime domain as one of the key pillars to sustain its global hegemonic status. But with China modernising its military capabilities and projecting presence well beyond its territorial waters, the dominance of the US Navy is now under contest and a new policy approach is needed.

The 2017 release of the Trump Administration’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) vision was an attempt to reaffirm US primacy across diplomatic, economic and military domains. Although a positive step forward, its sparse detail

led many Indo-Pacific nations to question the resolve of the US to remain committed to the region. It would not be until mid-2019 that an ‘implementation strategy’ was released that sought to ‘operationalise’ the FOIP vision. Named the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR), it identified how the rapid growth in Chinese military power would require the US to think differently about how it bases, moves and fights its forces in the Indo-Pacific.¹ More importantly, the IPSR also signified an ‘inflection point’ for the US, reflecting a hardening of its security posture in response to the changing balance of power in the region.

This strengthening of US security posture suggests a potential increase in US military presence across the Indo-Pacific. While Northeast Asia is well served by a number of established US bases in Korea and Japan, the US will be keen to extract greater utility from the key security relationships it holds in the southern region of the Indo-Pacific to enable a more distributed posture of its forces. Whether regional nations remain willing to support an expanded US security footprint will ultimately be subject to the influence such a decision may have upon the national interests of the country in question. In Australia’s case, with our national interests of security and prosperity largely dependent upon the US-led order, I argue that this renewed US approach to security in the Indo-Pacific offers an opportunity for Australia to modify its future defence policy, posture and force structure to attract greater US interest and engagement in our near region.

**Ends and means**

The release of the IPSR on 1 June 2019 was the first document of its kind in many years to provide specific context on how the Trump administration intended to assert its security posture in the region, reflecting a step-change in US declaratory.² Drawing from the National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS), the IPSR sought to articulate the security aspects of the FOIP vision for the Indo-Pacific. It signified a hardening of US security posture towards its ‘strategic competitors’, specifically identifying China and its ‘revisionist’ agenda as a key focus. Until recently, the US and other nations in the region

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had shown little willingness to seriously confront China over its coercive actions, particularly in the contested maritime domain. This was in part due to China’s adroit use of grey-zone tactics that enabled it to gradually increase influence and advantage without inciting a more robust military response from the US.  

Without the US directly confronting China about its island building and militarisation in the South China Sea, apprehension was fuelled over whether the US security assurance remained valid. However, the language used in the IPSR now suggests US tolerance for Chinese behaviour has lessened, with the US more determined to compete directly with China in what Henry Kissinger labelled ‘the key problem of our time’.  

At the 2019 AUSMIN conference, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reflected this shift in tone when discussing how the US sees the future of the region and its role in it:

> We stand firmly against a disturbing pattern of aggressive behavior, destabilizing behavior from China. This includes weaponizing the global commons, using predatory economics and debt for sovereignty deals, and promoting state-sponsored theft of other nations’ intellectual property. In the Indo-Pacific, power should not determine position and debt should not determine destiny. The United States will not stand by idly while any one nation attempts to reshape the region to its favor at the expense of others, and we know our allies and partners will not either.

Notwithstanding this reinforcement of the US narrative to confront China more directly, whether the US is able to effectively translate intent into action will be crucial to its success.

**The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report**

The IPSR was unveiled by then US Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan during his address at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue conference. The timing and venue for its release provided an ideal opportunity for the US to publicly assure the regional defence establishment of its commitment to the region as


its ‘priority theatre’. But its arrival was more noteworthy for the fact that it cemented geopolitical competition as the core determinant of how security would be organised in the region. Secretary Shanahan’s remarks make clear the US view that ‘no one country can or should dominate the Indo-Pacific’—drawing reference to China’s recent actions to reshape the regional order. Not surprisingly, the IPSR is quite explicit in detailing where the US will direct its security effort, devoting four pages to a ‘revisionist’ China—whereas the threats posed by North Korea, Russia and transnational crime only manage one page each. This focus on China also acknowledges concern regarding the modernisation and expansion of Chinese military forces, particularly those that might negate the technological and operational advantages that the US military has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. To that end, the IPSR ominously concedes that China is ‘likely to enjoy a local military advantage at the onset of conflict’ in East Asia, suggesting a possible admission by the US that its military superiority might not be as dominant as it once was. Jennings postulates that such an admission may have been the impetus for it ‘to restructure how it will base, move and fight its forces in Asia’ to better realise the dynamic and distributed presence envisioned for US forces as part of the FOIP vision.

To that end, the IPSR has sought to reprioritise the efforts of the 375,000 personnel, 2,000 aircraft, 200 ships and submarines that constitute INDOPACOM to better compete against the security challenges posed by China. It aims to achieve this through three ‘lines of effort’, namely: preparedness; partnerships; and a networked region. The first line emphasises the need for competent and capable forces, matched to innovative operating concepts that are designed to enable smarter distributed force posture and employment of US forces across the region. Evidence of this effort has already been seen through the highly successful US Force Posture Initiative underway in Australia and the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement in the Philippines, although recent reporting...
suggests this latter arrangement may now be at risk.\textsuperscript{15} The second line focuses on the need to modernise and strengthen America’s alliance network and partnership arrangements. The IPSR places significant importance on this aspect as a fundamental enabler of the FOIP vision, noting how US allies offer an ‘unparalleled advantage that no competitor or rival can match’.\textsuperscript{16} Reinvigoration of these relationships through increased engagement and interoperability training will help build capacity and trust among like-minded nations to assist the US in countering malign Chinese behaviour. The final line of effort relates to the promotion of a networked region. Here, the US seeks to amass its various alliances and partnerships into larger, more integrated coalitions (e.g. tri-lateral arrangements) to help share the security burden against common threats. But, while these lines of effort may serve to crystallise broader US intent for the region, the IPSR is less clear about how the limited resources available will be apportioned to deliver sustainable action—an issue that has not gone unnoticed by regional states.

\textbf{Importance of the US Navy to IPSR}

The US has long relied on naval mastery of the maritime domain as one of the pillars that underpin its global hegemonic status.\textsuperscript{17} With the IPSR focused on sustainment of US influence via its three lines of effort, the utility of the US Navy remains fundamental to its success. Its value as a visible representation of US commitment to a region helps ensure US influence remains relevant to the decision-making of allies, partners and potential adversaries as well as enabling opportunities for additional political, economic and military access.\textsuperscript{18} But none of this is possible unless the US Navy maintains a persistent and effective presence in the region, a challenge it is finding increasingly difficult to achieve. In early 2017, this concern was most noticeably demonstrated when the US was unable to deploy any of its aircraft carriers for the first time since World War Two.\textsuperscript{19} High tempo operation cycles, shrinking fleet sizes, tired platforms and use of status

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Schroeter, Sollenberger and Verink, ‘Challenging US Command of the Commons’, (see n.3).
quo operational concepts have all led to a reduction in US Navy effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific.\textsuperscript{20} Given the importance of the US Navy (USN) to the success of the IPSR, closer analysis of issues related to the capacity, capability and readiness of the USN can provide some insight as to whether the IPSR is likely to be another US policy destined to provide ‘lip service’ to its interests or one that successfully demonstrates real US commitment to the region in matching intent with actual effects.

Fundamental to the debate about declining USN influence has been the question of capacity and whether the USN has enough platforms to meet the demands placed on it. According to the NDS, fleet numbers matter significantly when it comes to maintaining presence and influence in vital areas and the USN has fewer ships now than at any time since 1914.\textsuperscript{21} As of October 2018, the USN had 286 ‘battle force’ ships available to support US interests around the globe, a number many analysts believe is insufficient to meet forward presence and other maritime requirements, particularly when the People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) and its ‘white fleet’ of maritime law enforcement vessels are expected to number 650 by 2020.\textsuperscript{22} However, of those 286 ships, the USN has had to continuously sustain 95 to 100 ships forward deployed around the globe (despite a 20 per cent decrease in fleet size since 2001). This has not been without costs, as evidenced by increased higher tempo deployment cycles, deferred maintenance and reduced training time as well as overworked crews.\textsuperscript{23}

Consequently, US Navy leadership has stated it cannot meet its deployed requirements with its existing fleet force structure.\textsuperscript{24} Naval analysts Callander, Ross and Johnson agree there is a capacity issue and advocate a 400-ship Navy will likely satisfy the growing demand for maritime responses providing there is a

\textsuperscript{20} Townshend, Thomas-Noone and Steward, ‘Averting Crisis’, (see n.5).
\textsuperscript{23} Whiteneck et al., ‘The Navy at a Tipping Point’.
stable funding commitment.\textsuperscript{25} But, despite Trump signing a defence authorisa-
tion bill in late 2017 that endorsed a fleet of 355 ‘battle force ships… as soon
as practicable’, an increase of 40 per cent over current numbers, there still re-
mainst doubt over whether this figure can actually be achieved, due to funding,
shipyard capacity and workforce concerns.\textsuperscript{26} A 2018 Government Audit Organ-
isation (GAO) report on Navy shipbuilding emphasised such concerns, noting
‘ship construction during the last 10 years had not achieved their cost, sched-
ule, quality and performance goals’.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, concern over the emerging
threat environment, where large warships may become more vulnerable to at-
tack in contested areas, is also likely to alter the 355 target and possibly reflect
a higher build of smaller surface ships and unmanned vessels.\textsuperscript{28}

Notwithstanding the argument to build capacity, the ability of the USN to ex-
ercise influence in the maritime space is also driven by capability. While China
may have more capacity in terms of ship numbers, it is argued the US still re-
tains the edge in capability for now, noting its 2018 defence budget of approx-
imately US$700 billion still dwarfs China’s US$250 billion.\textsuperscript{29} But, advancements
in Chinese technologies, including anti-access area denial (A2AD), submarines
and long-range precision strike weapons as well as its exploitation of grey-zone
tactics, such as the ‘cabbage’ strategy of wrapping disputed islands in layers of
civilian, paramilitary and military protection, have complicated the ability of the
USN to unilaterally exercise sea control and undermined its dominance in the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{25} Thomas Callander, Special Report No. 205: The Nation Needs a 400-ship Navy? (Washington DC.: The
the-nation-needs-400-ship-navy; Robert Ross, ‘The End of U.S. Dominance in Asia’, Lawfare (The Lawfare
Institute in cooperation with The Brookings Institute, 18 November 2018), accessed 4 April 2019, https://
www.lawfareblog.com/2018-11-18-us-naval-dominance-asia; see also Justin T. Johnson, ‘Politicians and Analysts
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accessed 17 April 2019, https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/politicians-and-analysts-call-larger-
navy-can-we-afford-it.
\bibitem{26} US Department of the Defence, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving
.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf (accessed 15 May
2019); Axe, ‘US Navy Nightmare’ (see n.21); Bradley Martin et al., A Strategic Assessment of the Future of
\bibitem{27} US Government Accountability Office, Navy Shipbuilding: Past Performance Provides Valuable Lessons for
products/GAO-18-238SP#summary.
\bibitem{28} Dave Majumdar, ‘U.S. Admiral Richardson: 355-Ship Navy is “Insufficient”’ (Thanks to Russia and China),
admiral-richardson-355-ship-navy-insufficient-thanks-20704.
\bibitem{29} Ian Livingston and Michael E. O’Hanlon, ‘Why China isn’t ahead of the US Navy, even with more ships’,
The Brookings Institute, 10 September 2018, accessed 4 April 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-
Naval Dominance in Asia’ (see n.25).
\end{thebibliography}
Indo-Pacific.\textsuperscript{30} In 2018, the National Defense Strategy Commission, a bipartisan US defence committee, released a report stating US military superiority had eroded to a ‘dangerous degree’.\textsuperscript{31} Although the report verified US capability was not diminishing, it did identify that China was in fact ‘catching up’—suggesting the relative capabilities between the two militaries are drawing closer.\textsuperscript{32} Peterson labelled this development the ‘tipping point’ in 2010 and stressed that the US needed to re-think its strategy and force structure to mitigate the rapid growth of the PLA-N.\textsuperscript{33} There is widespread agreement that the inability of the US to retain a comfortable margin ahead of China is mainly attributed to funding issues. Ross and Callander have argued strongly for greater funding stability to support ship building plans to bolster numbers and capabilities to regain US maritime dominance. But, the aftermath of the Budgetary Control Act sequestration measures, shipyard capacity and the legacy of previous force structure decisions have all hampered advancement of US military capability.\textsuperscript{34}

Former Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis once said, ‘the surest way to prevent a war is to be prepared to fight one’.\textsuperscript{35} While having capacity and capability is important, Mattis’s key point of being prepared alludes to the need to be ‘ready’, as it contributes to the deterrence effect in exerting influence and dominance. Readiness of naval forces is a function of three components: people, material and the time needed to both train and maintain people and platforms.\textsuperscript{36} There is a growing consensus that this aspect has suffered the most dramatic and visible decline in recent years.\textsuperscript{37} Over a period of 70 days during 2017, the USN suffered its worst peacetime surface ship collisions and groundings in over


\textsuperscript{32} Ross, ‘The End of US Naval Dominance in Asia’ (see n.25).


\textsuperscript{35} Callander, ‘The Nation Needs’ (n. 25).

\textsuperscript{36} Heritage Organisation, An Assessment of US Military Power, 359 (see n.19).

41 years, resulting in the loss of 17 sailors.\textsuperscript{38} Subsequent inquiries found a culmination of factors ranging from insufficient training, overworked sailors, deferred maintenance and high operational demands led to the accidents.\textsuperscript{39} Of note, China was quick to exploit the USN mishaps, using the opportunity to label the USN as ‘dangerous and unpredictable’ in an effort to discredit their professionalism and reliability as a security partner in the region.\textsuperscript{40} A GAO Audit in 2018 re-affirmed how enduring personnel and maintenance challenges were severely impacting the readiness state of the USN, with several retired admirals labelling the Service as ‘too small, too old, and too tired’.\textsuperscript{41}

Implications for Australia

As the US attempts to refocus its security efforts to better engage in great power competition with China, it is becoming increasingly evident that its ability to independently underwrite regional security is waning. While the US still remains a significant military power, the rapid modernisation and expansion of the PLA have reduced its technological and operational advantages, meaning US forces will now need to work harder to sustain predominance in the region. With the US Navy facing major capacity, capability and readiness challenges into the foreseeable future, we should expect the US to look to its allies and partners to help share more of the security burden.\textsuperscript{42} The IPSR places considerable emphasis on these relationships and the value they add to US military power as ‘force multipliers’.\textsuperscript{43} For Australia, this emphasis represents a significant opportunity to further develop its longstanding alliance relationship with the US across several

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item US Navy Office of Information, ‘Navy Releases Collision Report’ (see n.21).
  \item US DoD, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, 5.
\end{enumerate}
\end{flushleft}
fronts, particularly towards drawing US interest closer to Australia’s immediate region. But while Australia may share a common desire to uphold the US-led order, it has been less vocal about labelling China—its largest trading partner—as a ‘strategic competitor’, as the US has done in its FOIP vision. But given the success of Prime Minister Morrison’s recent visit to the White House in September 2019 and the obvious mutual admiration between Trump and his Australian counterpart, the US may be shaping Australia to increase its level of military engagement. While there may be an active debate in Australia about the value and nature of the relationship with the US, there remains a bipartisan consensus, backed up by majority support in opinion polls (e.g. 72 per cent support in the 2019 Lowy Institute Poll), that the US alliance is still important to maintain in support of Australia’s interests.44

**Importance of the US–Australia relationship**

Recent commentaries from analysts such as Hugh White have questioned the longevity and ability of the US to maintain its strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific.45 A combination of factors, ranging from a rising China through to the volatile actions of an isolationist US President, have meant the US will not only have to work harder to sustain its predominance but will need support from its allies and partners to preserve the stability and security of the current order.46 In this regard, Australia has remained a firm supporter of the US, undertaking a dual-track approach that seeks to both strengthen the ADF and improve regional relations consistent with the tenets of the US-led order. In recent years, Australia has reinforced its own defence capability through the purchase of advanced capabilities, including Landing Helicopter Docks and F-35A tactical fighters, as well as expanding its defence engagement with regional partners via activities such as the Pacific Step-Up initiative and Indo-Pacific Endeavour naval task group deployments.47 Australia has also continued to demonstrate support for US predominance in the global domain, as evidenced by the recent decision to contribute a frigate and P8A surveillance aircraft to the US-led Maritime Security

47 Scott W. Harold et al, ‘The Thickening Web’ (see n.42).
Construct effort in the Strait of Hormuz.48 But aside from these efforts, Australia and the US have also sought to strengthen and deepen the alliance commitment through other initiatives.

Australia maintains a comprehensive but evolving alliance relationship with the US. Arising from President Obama’s ‘pivot’ speech to the Australian Parliament in November 2011, the announcement of the US Force Posture Initiative marked a significant upgrade in the level of engagement between the two nations.49 Under a shared facilities and costing arrangement, the USFPI consists of rotational deployments of US Marines (USMC) and US Air Force (USAF) capabilities to Australian military bases each year, as a means to not only visibly demonstrate the strength of the Alliance but also to improve interoperability and conduct regional engagement. The primary value of the Initiative, according to Crane, is that it supports the IPSR through its contribution ‘to a geographically dispersed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable military presence in the Indo-Pacific’.50 The USMC activity commenced in 2012 with 200 Marines deployed to Darwin, but since being deployed in 2019 it has risen to a 2,500-man high-readiness Marine Expeditionary Unit.51 The USAF activity commenced in 2017 and is known as the Enhanced Air Cooperation initiative. It involves various USAF aircraft undertaking short deployments to airbases in northern Australia to conduct independent and combined training with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). Interestingly, no naval initiative was included at the time the USFPI was introduced. Although the 2013 Defence White Paper stated there would be interest in ‘potential opportunities for additional [US] naval cooperation at a range of locations, including HMAS Stirling’ under the USFPI construct, no such statement appeared in the 2016 iteration for reasons unknown, suggesting Australia may have gone ‘cold’ on the idea.52 Nonetheless, having now operated for several


51 Department of Defence, ‘United States Force Posture Initiatives’, (see n.15).

years, the USMC and USAF initiatives continue to serve both countries very well in terms of supporting their respective strategic objectives.\(^{53}\)

Notwithstanding the mutual benefit gained from the USFPI, Australia remains under pressure from the US to contribute further to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. During the 2019 AUSMIN meeting, this expectation was clearly evident from US Secretary of State Pompeo, who observed how ‘the time is now right for the United States and Australia to do much more together in the region and beyond’.\(^{54}\) Such remarks not only provide a reassurance of ongoing US interest in the region but also open a significant strategic opportunity for Australia to help offset the costs borne by the US to maintain regional peace and security, which in turn helps preserve Australia’s strategic interests too.\(^{55}\)

**How can Australia be expected to help?**

The advent of the Indo-Pacific concept has arguably elevated the strategic relevance of Australia in how it might help support US efforts in managing the ‘ends–means gap’ towards preserving regional stability and security. Situated at the fulcrum between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australia’s strategic geography represents an opportunity to assist the US towards sustaining its predominance in the region, particularly into the Indian Ocean. With its main naval bases located in Northeast Asia, the US Navy has no significant basing options in South or Southeast Asia to support a persistent presence where most of the emerging tension and threats are present, either due to political sensitivities or the lack of suitable infrastructure. Although Guam might be the closest US naval port to this area, it not only lacks the necessary infrastructure to support significant numbers of naval platforms but also remains within range of the Chinese DF-26 ‘Guam Killer’ intermediate ballistic missile threat.\(^{56}\) Similarly, the Naval Support Facility at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean serves mainly as a logistics base and has even fewer facilities than Guam to support maritime assets.

Outside of these basing options, the US would need to sail its limited number of naval assets from either Japan or Hawaii to respond to a crisis, resulting in increased deployment times and placing additional strain on already tired plat-

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54 US Department of State, ‘Remarks to the Press’ (see n. 8)

55 Scott W. Harold et al, ‘The Thickening Web’, (see n.42)

forms and crews. Faced with such circumstances, the advantages of posturing additional US forces in Australia is an attractive option, particularly when complemented with excellent relations at the political, operational and strategic levels.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, Australia’s closer proximity to potential crisis areas, availability of supporting military and civilian infrastructure, unrestricted training/weapon ranges, and modern transport networks, as well as being remote from potential threats like the DF-26 and other striking arms of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), make it a highly suitable location for the deployment of additional forces.\textsuperscript{58}

While the permanent basing of US forces in Australia is not likely to be palatable in the current political climate (noting the sensitivity of the economic relationship with China), other options exist where Australia could support an increased rotational US security presence. Following AUSMIN 19, it was evident discussion did take place between US and Australian officials concerning the USFPI, but other than the acknowledgment of a future AUS$2 billion infrastructure spend by both nations to support the current USFPI arrangements (including airfield enhancements, accommodation and training range developments) no specific comment was made about any adjustment to US force posture in Australia.\textsuperscript{59} Notwithstanding the lack of detail offered, a positive narrative to further develop the alliance was intimated by officials. In response to Secretary Pompeo’s call to ‘do more’ together, Foreign Minister Payne noted how ‘the presence of the US and its military forces in this region has been a force for stability for decades’ whilst also making the point that Australia has consistently ‘welcomed’ such a presence, suggesting an evolution of the security relationship may already be under consideration.\textsuperscript{60} One option might be to extend the USMC rotation from six months to twelve. Although this would overlap with the wet season in northern Australia, training value could still be gained through the deployment of US forces to alternative locations around the country.

\textbf{Naval options}

Despite the official statements downplaying any increase in the US military presence in Australia, there remain several options in which Australia could deepen engagement with the US and support its continued presence in the region. With land and air elements already covered under the USFPI, commentators agree

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Yoshihara, ‘The US Navy’, DOI: 10.1080/19480881.2013.793914.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Payne, ‘AUSMIN’.
\end{itemize}
the next logical choice for expansion should focus on options related to naval posture as a new phase of cooperation.\textsuperscript{61} With the US adopting its distributed forces concept across the Indo-Pacific, it now faces greater intra-theatre logistics and lift challenges in having to move and sustain its forces when required. As an example, the 2,500 high-readiness US Marines in Darwin are in location without amphibious shipping or strategic air to move them and their equipment around the region, with the nearest ships based in either Yokosuka or Sasebo—several days sailing away. Such challenges have prompted renewed discussion about the potential option of homeporting USN assets in Australia, with HMAS Stirling in Western Australia as a possible alternative due to the limited nature of the naval infrastructure in Darwin.\textsuperscript{62} The USN regularly visits Stirling as a recreational, logistics and maintenance port for its ships and submarines transiting either to or from the Middle East. In the early 2000s, the base hosted the USN ‘Sea Swap’ initiative, an activity that witnessed the USN undertake major maintenance activities and crew swaps in Western Australia rather than have the ship return to the US. This endeavour not only provided various benefits to the local economy through industry and recreational gains but also saved the USN up to six weeks transit time in fuel and platform availability costs, enabling the USN to increase the number and efficiency of its ships to undertake more operations at sea.\textsuperscript{63}

Although the Sea Swap activity has since ended due to a US decision to conduct them elsewhere, additional studies into the feasibility of using Stirling to ‘homeport’ USN ships/submarines have been directed by the US Department of Defense. Conducted by the Centre for Strategic and Security Studies (CSIS) in 2012 and the RAND Corporation in 2013, these studies examined opportunities for re-posturing US forces around the world.\textsuperscript{64} The CSIS study considered various homeporting options from single platforms up to the basing of an aircraft carrier strike group (consisting of up to eight ships, submarines and an air wing) at the base.\textsuperscript{65} Although the latter option was discounted due to the excessive


\textsuperscript{62} Crane, ‘Boosting the US presence’ (see n.50); Jennings, ‘Mr Morrison Goes to Washington’.

\textsuperscript{63} Brown, ‘Sea Swap’ (see n.61).


\textsuperscript{65} Berteau and Green, ‘U.S. Force Posture’, 74.
costs involved to construct the supporting infrastructure, estimated at US$6.5 billion in 2012, it did demonstrate the seriousness with which the US was considering its posturing options. While the presence of a strike group was obviously not feasible, both reports did discuss options to homeport a US nuclear submarine at Stirling. Noting Stirling is already an approved port for nuclear vessels and features significant and secure maintenance and training facilities designed to support submarine operations, it presents as an attractive option for the US to strengthen its presence in the region. However, the basing of a US nuclear capability in Australia is not without risk. Although political and social sensitivities might negate such an option, the rotational basing of conventionally powered warships or auxiliaries could prove to be more palatable for the local community.

One option to increase the operational presence of the USN could involve the rotational deployment of amphibious shipping to Australia. As already identified, the USMC presence in Darwin does not have sufficient lift capabilities in situ to project them into the region at will. A recent Centre for International Maritime Security report highlighted the existential issue of lift for USMC and US Army operations in the Pacific. Due to the distances involved, likely threats and questionable availability of airfields, there is a strong preference for sealift as a means to ensure forces can be rapidly moved in a survivable way that is consistent with the new US ‘distributed operations’ doctrine. While Australia might possess sealift capabilities, guaranteeing their availability to support a US operation would be difficult to predict. Recent news reporting revealed the US may be preparing to spend approximately US$305.9 million on naval infrastructure in the Northern Territory—leading some to speculate it will involve an upgrade to port facilities for future basing of USN ships. Although this proposed expenditure has yet to be approved by Congress, there are few details on what it will actually be spent on. Nonetheless, HMAS Stirling still remains a viable basing option for the USN that warrants further consideration, as it would serve the interests of both nations in not only strengthening US posture in the region but also enabling increased interoperability/training opportunities for the ADF. Furthermore,

66 Berteau and Green, ‘U.S. Force Posture’.
68 Mills, ‘No Free Ride in the Pacific’.
the ability to project US and Australian naval power from *Stirling* would ‘help reset the maritime security agenda in a big, positive way’ and re-establish US and allied initiative in the Indo-Pacific once more.\(^7\)

**Conclusion**

The release of the IPSR heralds a hardening of US security posture in the Indo-Pacific as the US attempts to reaffirm its primacy in this dynamic region. Unlike previous approaches, the US has clearly expressed its concern about China’s hegemonic aspirations and is now adjusting its policies to better posture for the reality of great power competition. An increasingly assertive and confident China is determined to assume its ‘rightful’ place as the hegemon in the Indo-Pacific and has rapidly modernised its military capabilities to such an extent that it can now legitimately contest the USN for the command of the commons. Although the region appears receptive to this latest change in US policy towards the Indo-Pacific, apprehension remains as to whether the US can operationalise the IPSR without raising tensions or pre-empting conflict with China. As this paper has attempted to illustrate, the US and more specifically the USN face some significant internal and external challenges towards meeting this aim, meaning the US will need to not only work harder to sustain its predominance but rely more heavily on support from its key allies and partnerships. Noting a US-led order is critical to Australia’s national interests, this presents an ideal opportunity for Australia to review how it might choose to assist the US in sharing the security and stability burden in the Indo-Pacific.

Although the recent visit to the US by Prime Minister Morrison may have re-affirmed the strong relationship Australia shares with its powerful ally, there is a growing appetite within the Trump administration for Australia to contribute more. The IPSR places considerable emphasis on the value key allies and partnerships have in acting as ‘force multipliers’ for US military power. In recent years, Australia has actively demonstrated its value through the modernisation of its defence force, reinvigoration of its regional defence engagement effort and ongoing support for the USFPI. But, while these commitments are significant, the findings of this paper offer some suggestions where Australia could be expected to do more. Although a permanent US military base on Australian soil may be a political step too far, expansion of the USFPI to encompass a maritime element represents a feasible alternative. The naval base at HMAS Stirling presents as an attractive option to establish a rotational presence of USN assets from which both nations would be able to draw significant advantages, not the least of which would be a firm demonstration of IPSR intent. Nonetheless, the

\(^7\) Shoebridge, ‘Two ideas to help Trump and Morrison’ (see n.53).
viability of such options warrants serious consideration by Australia as do the potential implications an increase US military presence may have on its own regional relationships.