



**Australian Army
Research Centre**



**Strategic
Assessment**
Quarter 3, 2021

Serving our Nation



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Introduction

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August, and the announcement of the Australia, United Kingdom and United States (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership in September, mark the third quarter (Q3) 2021 Strategic Assessment as covering the most significant strategic developments since these assessments began. Despite the extensive recent commentary about the end of the West's campaign in Afghanistan and the beginning of an important new strategic partnership, there is still a great deal of unknown detail about what each will ultimately mean. Accordingly this assessment errs on the side of caution with respect to detailing what is known fact, rather than narrating speculation and opinion. In time, as further information emerges and detailed objective analysis is possible, these topics will be subject to further examination.

While there is considerable strategic novelty in this Q3 Strategic Assessment, the COVID-19 pandemic remains the subject of ongoing analysis. Australia continues to battle the emergence of the Delta strain of the virus, with record case numbers informing lockdowns in some places of hitherto unprecedented length. Globally the Delta strain and other variants are also increasingly problematic. This is challenging formerly optimistic forecasts. There is a developing realisation among public officials that the impacts of the pandemic will certainly continue well beyond the deployment of vaccines.

The ongoing nexus between the pandemic and the economy remains under review. This assessment covers recent Reserve Bank of Australia thinking on the subject. Related to economics, the paper also looks at the growing cyber phenomenon of ransomware attacks.

Apart from AUKUS, this assessment also details the release of other nations' national policy statements regarding strategy and security. It examines those of Japan and Russia, highlighting again the perennial importance to Australia of understanding the geopolitics and power relativities of the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, the war in Afghanistan may be over but rebellion, insurrection and terrorism endure. This assessment briefly examines some of these issues in areas as disparate as Latin America, the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

AUKUS

On 16 September 2021, the Australian Prime Minister announced the creation of an enhanced trilateral security partnership – AUKUS¹ – in conjunction with the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. AUKUS is a response to growing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. It seeks to build on the three nations' longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties. It will enable the partners to deepen significantly cooperation on a range of emerging security and defence capabilities, which will enhance joint capability and interoperability.

The first AUKUS initiative (and the 'headline' element) is that the US and the UK will work with Australia to develop a nuclear submarine capability for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) (along with the decision to not proceed with the planned acquisition of the 'Attack' class submarines from France's Naval Group). Other initial efforts under AUKUS will focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies.

Also detailed in the Prime Minister's announcement was the acquisition of other significant defence capabilities for Australia:

- Tomahawk cruise missiles for the RAN's Air Warfare Destroyers
- Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM) (Extended Range) which will enable RAAF F/A-18 A/B Hornets, and in future, F-35A Lightning II, to hit targets at a range of 900 km
- Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (Extended Range) (LRASM) for the F/A-18F Super Hornet

¹ AUKUS: Australia, United Kingdom and United States. The three leaders have phonetically pronounced it as 'Awkuss'.

- Continuing collaboration with the United States to develop hypersonic missiles for Australia's air capabilities
- Precision strike guided missiles for the Australian Army, capable of destroying, neutralising and suppressing targets from ranges over 400 km
- Accelerating \$1 billion for a sovereign guided weapons manufacturing enterprise.

Further detail regarding AUKUS appeared in the official joint communiqué from AUSMIN 2022 on 17 September 2021.² The paragraph titled 'Enhanced Force Posture Cooperation and Alliance Integration' detailed agreement on endorsement of a major expansion of the United States Force Posture Initiatives (USFPI) in Australia, comprising:

- Enhanced air cooperation through the rotational deployment of United States' aircraft of all types in Australia and appropriate aircraft training and exercises.
- Enhanced maritime cooperation by increasing logistics and sustainment capabilities of United States surface and subsurface vessels in Australia.
- Enhanced land cooperation by conducting more complex and more integrated exercises and greater combined engagement with Allies and Partners in the region.
- Establishing a combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise to support high-end warfighting and combined military operations in the region.

Reaction to the AUKUS announcement amongst regional nations has so far been consistent with their long-term foreign and defence policy positions vis-a-vis Australia and the United States. India has formally remained silent, although some Indian foreign policy experts assert that AUKUS is a welcome development. Indonesia and Singapore have noted the development and stated the need for further work towards regional stability and peace. Indonesia also raises specific concerns about AUKUS stimulating a regional arms race. New Zealand's PM Jacinda Ardern has stated that AUKUS will not influence her country's existing relationships with the nations in the new trilateral relationship. Ms Ardern has also noted that the lack of consultation was unsurprising as New Zealand policy and law preclude the nuclear aspects of the arrangement.

² AUSMIN (the Australia–United States Ministerial Consultations) is an annual activity involving formal meetings/consultation between the Australian Foreign Minister and Defence Minister and the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense.

AUKUS is a significant development but one that it is still largely inchoate with respect to details, timings and funding. These details will doubtless emerge over the next period. AUKUS bells the cat with respect to the focus of the trilateral defence partners and their future industry, technology and innovation actions.

Pandemic

The current number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 internationally is around 232 million (up from 181 million in the Q2 Strategic Assessment), with 4.7 million deaths globally as of 27 September 2021.³ Domestically, the eastern states of Australia have continued to battle outbreaks of the Delta strain of COVID-19, with over half the population being in lockdown over July and August. The ADF remains involved through Operation COVID-19 ASSIST, responding to new tasks as the virus spread throughout Australia. In July, the ADF accepted the NSW Government's request for assistance to establish roadblocks and ensure that people who had tested positive were isolating at home. Three hundred ADF personnel deployed to help with the operation in July, and a further 500 deployed in August. Due to their location and the nature of their duties, the majority of this effort fell upon the Army Reserve, reinforcing their growing mission in humanitarian assistance and Defence aid. As of late July, 65% of the permanent ADF has received one dose of a vaccine, with 40% fully vaccinated. Only fully vaccinated ADF personnel deploy to aid state authorities.⁴

Regionally COVID-19 remains highly virulent. Its continued presence increases the risk of mutations entering Australia, as well as the risk of local instability and breakdown in governance. Early this quarter, Indonesia became the global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, overtaking India and Brazil in reported daily cases. Hospitals are being overwhelmed with up to 50,000 new cases per day, and the death toll has exceeded 141,585.⁵

3 World Health Organization, 'WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard', at <https://covid19.who.int/>, as at 28 September 2021.

4 Daniel Hurst, 'More than 40% of Australian defence force fully vaccinated', *The Guardian* online, 21 July 2021, [accessed 6 August 2021]; Shannon Jenkins, 'ADF members in Sydney fully vaccinated, Defence says', *The Mandarin* online, 3 August 2021 [accessed 6 August 2021].

5 World Health Organization, 'WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard'.

Health experts believe that these figures understate the situation due to limited testing taking place. The latest tragedy in Indonesia's fight against COVID-19 is the extraordinary rise of fatalities among Indonesian healthcare workers. Before the pandemic, Indonesia only had 4.65 doctors per 10,000 people, compared to 37.6 in Australia.⁶ At least 545 doctors, 445 nurses, 42 pharmacists, and 223 midwives have died from contracting COVID-19.⁷

Indonesian health facilities have started to buckle under this pressure. Of concern, children now make up 12.6% of Indonesia's confirmed cases.⁸ Infectious disease experts have warned that the speed and scale of Indonesia's outbreak has created the perfect breeding ground for a potential new variant that is more contagious or more deadly. Australia has announced that it will urgently send medical equipment and 2.5 million doses of vaccine to Indonesia by the end of the year. Similarly, Canberra has continued to provide medical assistance to Fiji to help combat their escalating COVID-19 crisis. The Fijian outbreak has spiked in the third quarter, with the Pacific Island nation continuously recording over 100 new cases a day. Australia heeded Fiji's request for support by sending a multidisciplinary medical team and 50,000 vaccine doses.⁹ Australia has now donated 250,000 vaccine doses, 1.3 tonnes of medical equipment, and \$83.5 million to Fiji this year.¹⁰

Vaccines remain the best long-term option to moderate the severity of the virus, although public officials around the world have largely abandoned ideas that 'herd immunity' or elimination of the virus as realistic health outcomes. The situation in Europe is instructive, with the rate of virus transmission at 2020 levels despite high levels of vaccination. The WHO is monitoring eight strains of the virus and has repeatedly warned of the potentiality of new potent strains. It is highly likely that existing requirements for military support to domestic and international public health operations will continue.

6 Max Walden, 'Trainee doctors pushed to the front line of Indonesia's COVID-19 disaster', *ABC News* online, 14 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

7 Mackenzie Smith and Tahlea Aualitia, 'Fiji health staff who test positive for COVID-19 asked to continue working as outbreak worsens', *ABC News* online, 28 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

8 'No longer "hidden victims," children are dying as virus surges in Indonesia', *The New York Times* online, 31 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

9 See Senator the Hon. Marise Payne, 'Additional support for Fiji', media release, 18 June 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

10 Stephen Dziedzic, 'Australia to send 50,000 more doses of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to Fiji', *ABC News* online, 19 June 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

Economics

The Australian economy had established strong momentum prior to the outbreaks of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in Q3. The September meeting of the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) took note of a slowing of economic momentum internationally off the back of ongoing COVID-19 disruptions. It also observed on the domestic front:

The outbreak of the Delta variant had interrupted the recovery in a manner that was more severe than expected a month earlier. While private demand had increased solidly in the June quarter, the spread of the Delta variant in New South Wales and Victoria had set back the recovery and created uneven conditions across states and industries. GDP was expected to decline materially in the September quarter; the near-term outlook resembled the downside scenario presented in the most recent forecasts.¹¹

Employment participation rates and average hours worked were high, especially in comparison to most other countries.¹² The latest outbreaks and accompanying lockdowns introduced a high degree of uncertainty and somewhat tempered the economic outlook for the second half of 2021. The expectation was for activity and employment to decline in the immediate near term; a possible offset is the momentum Australia gained in Q2 of 2021, which should cushion the overall negative economic effects. The medium-term outlook for Australia's major trading partners has generally remained solid. The RBA's baseline scenario for economic forecasting assumes that the Australian vaccine rollout will accelerate in the months ahead, reducing the frequency and severity of lockdowns and allowing international borders to reopen gradually from mid-2022.¹³

11 Reserve Bank of Australia, 'September minutes of the monetary policy meeting of the Reserve Bank Board', 7 September 2021 [accessed 28 September 2021].

12 Reserve Bank of Australia, 'August minutes of the monetary policy meeting of the Reserve Bank Board', 3 August 2021 [accessed 23 August 2021].

13 Ibid.

The Australian Government fiscal stimulus that was seen in 2020 is reducing, with the RBA also seeking to conclude its own stimulus activities. This foreshadows fiscal tightening and poses a risk to public service budgets; financial prudence in Defence will remain highly relevant to the Department's reputation within Government. Increasingly the Commonwealth is linking financial support to vaccination rates and the opening of state economies.

The Q2 Strategic Assessment flagged the burgeoning spate of ransomware attacks in 2021. The third quarter has seen some further troubling developments in this regard. A report published by the Cyber Security Cooperative Research Centre estimated that cybercrime has cost the global economy US\$1 trillion.¹⁴ Australian organisations have continue to pay ransoms to hackers who have stolen or encrypted their data. Ransomware attacks have cost the Australian economy \$2.5 billion in the last year.¹⁵ More than half of Australian businesses were targets of cyberattacks in the past 12 months.¹⁶ Of those impacted by ransomware, one-third paid the ransom. The average ransom was \$1.25 million, and only 76% of those who paid received their data back.¹⁷ It is worth noting the assessment that all of these statistics are under-representative because most ransomware cases are unreported.

The large-scale shift online during the pandemic has meant increased digital traffic and a larger surface area for cyber criminals to attack. Criminals have started dealing in 'Ransomware as a Service' (RAAS) software, enabling affiliates to utilise programs and pay a percentage of illicitly gained profits as a commission. The four sectors in Australia that have been most targeted are health, government agencies, education and research, and transport. Australia's largest insurance companies have endorsed the idea floated by the Australian Government to ban companies from making ransomware payments.¹⁸ IAG, QBE, and Marsh have acknowledged they have had difficulties evaluating how much cyber coverage they can afford to offer, and that payments act as a perverse incentive to cyber criminals. Department of Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo has confirmed that the Government is considering a mandatory reporting regime for companies that pay ransoms.¹⁹

14 James Purtill, 'Australian organisations are quietly paying hackers millions in a "tsunami of cyber crime"', *ABC News* online, 16 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

15 Jennifer Dudley-Nicholson, 'Ransom payments to stay secret', *The Herald Sun* online, 11 August 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

16 Max Mason, 'More than half of Australian businesses disrupted by cyber attacks', *Financial Review* online, 23 April 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

17 Ibid.

18 Michael Roddan, 'Insurers call for death of cyber ransom payments', *Financial Review* online, 28 June 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

19 Max Mason, 'Business could face mandatory reporting of cyber payouts: Pezzullo', *Financial Review* online, 24 May 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

Politics

The world has seen a significant increase in domestic unrest in the third quarter of 2021, continuing the trend discussed in the Q2 Strategic Assessment. Political systems, especially in some ‘less democratic’ regimes, have seen considerable disruptions upon failing to deliver on public health and economic concerns. This is especially evident in the Americas and Africa. It is possible that humanitarian and economic crises will necessitate international and non-government organisation led interventions. In democratic countries, including Australia, pandemic ‘fatigue’ and conflict over responsibilities continues to place pressure on federated methods of governance.

Months of violent protest in Haiti preceded the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse in July. The Caribbean nation has experienced considerable turmoil since the devastating earthquakes in 2010. Many Haitians were dissatisfied with gas shortages, blackouts, austerity measures, inflation, gang violence, and proposed constitutional amendments.²⁰ The arrest and charging of Colombian mercenaries with the murder, and the installation of Ariel Henry as interim Prime Minister have not resolved the turmoil. Henry has requested troops and security assistance from the United Nations.

South Africa is experiencing its worst internal violence since the transition from apartheid, with the imprisonment of ex-President Jacob Zuma on contempt charges sparking a wave of protests and looting. Zuma’s arrest arose because he did not appear at a corruption trial. The civil unrest

20 Tamanisha John, ‘Slain Haitian president faced calls for resignation, sustained mass protests before killing’, *The Conversation* online, 8 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

has claimed at least 212 lives and caused massive economic damage.²¹ President Cyril Ramaphosa has deployed 25,000 soldiers to suppress the violence. Further fuelling the difficulties are high unemployment, increasing corruption and the economic fallout of COVID-19. Further unrest is highly likely in quarter four of 2021 given the deteriorating conditions in South Africa.

Cuba has also been plunged into turmoil by the largest anti-government protests in decades. Thousands of people took to the streets because of societal exhaustion stemming from major food and medicine shortages, curbs on civil rights, inflation, and government handling of the pandemic.²² President Miguel Díaz-Canel inflamed the situation by calling for government supporters to fight during the protests. Subsequently there have been reports of hundreds of protesters going missing.²³ Twenty countries have condemned the Cuban Government response.

Six rounds of negotiations in Vienna have failed to yield an agreement to re-implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that would see the United States offer sanctions relief to Iran in exchange for Tehran scaling back its uranium enrichment activities. The initial agreement for the landmark accord by Iran and several other states was in 2015. European-led diplomats have attempted to reinstate the agreement after ex-President Trump abandoned the deal in 2018. The third quarter of 2021 saw newly elected leaders in the United States and Iran signal willingness to return to the negotiation table.²⁴ However, a deal remains unlikely. Any agreement reached in the coming months will be limited, restricting Iran's nuclear capabilities but neither its ballistic missile program nor its support of proxy factions across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

21 S'thembele Cele, 'South Africa mops up after violent protests shake the nation', *Bloomberg* online, 17 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

22 Lioman Lima, 'Cuba protests: three key issues that explain the rare unrest', *BBC News* online, 12 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

23 Martha Kelner, 'Cuba protests: more than 500 people still missing two weeks after anti-government protests, activists say', *Sky News* online, 25 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

24 Kali Robinson, 'What is the Iran nuclear deal?', *Council on Foreign Relations* website, 29 June 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

Strategic Environment

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August, and the subsequent non-combatant evacuation operation from Hamid Karzai International Airport, definitively ended the West's military campaign in Afghanistan. It also triggered waves of 'expert' analysis stating what went wrong and who was to blame, confirming that the majority of commentators knew and understood as little about the end of the war in Afghanistan as they did about the war throughout the previous two decades of its conduct. Beyond the recognition of defeat, only two things are equally certain at this time. The first point is that there is not one discrete factor that can satisfactorily account for the failure alone. Strategy and strategic choices by the West; understanding of Afghan politics, culture and society; the manner in which security force assistance was conducted and the failure to deny sanctuary to insurgent groups in Pakistan are all factors (along with many others) for examination and assessment. This raises the other certainty: only after an objective and contestable examination of all the factors will we identify appropriate lessons and be able to act upon them.

In July, Japan released its Annual White Paper, *Defense of Japan*. It advocates a regional institutionalised cooperative framework for the Indo-Pacific, emphasising 'the raising of tensions in the East China Sea and other sea areas is completely unacceptable'.²⁵ The paper contends that this issue 'cannot be dealt with by a single country alone', noting Japan will 'closely co-operate with countries that share the same fundamental values'. The White Paper also highlights increasing security challenges in the space, cyber and electromagnetic domains. This is a particularly important

25 Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2021*, 13 July 2021, at: https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf.

document for Australia, as it marks a public shift in Japanese views and intent. It continues the recent trend for proactive Japanese contribution to regional peace and security and meshes with Australian policy and perspectives on the region.²⁶

Russia updated its National Security Policy in July for the first time since 2015.²⁷ While rejecting the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific', it emphasises Moscow's commitment to increased military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The Sino-Russian partnership has become Russia's most important bilateral relationship, reflecting shared interests and foreign policy convergence. Recently the partnership has grown to include joint military exercises, with the ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021 military exercise in September being one of the largest to date.

Russia has also been showing an increasing tendency to deploy its most advanced equipment to the Indo-Pacific over the past year. In December 2020, Russia announced the deployment of S-300V4 long-range/anti-ballistic missile surface-to-air missile systems to the Etorofu and Kunashiri Islands.²⁸ This marked the start of Russian Tu-95 bombers, along with Chinese H-6 bombers, carrying out long-distance joint flights from the Sea of Japan to the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, which continue today. Beyond improving the Sino-Russian partnership, Moscow has engaged with several Asian institutions, such as ASEAN, APEC and the East Asia Summit. However, it still has very little economic influence or soft power that it can exert in Asia, with engagement largely consisting of opportunistic arms sales. These arms sales are small but widespread, with Vietnam one of the largest purchasers of Russian weaponry. Russia has delivered Vietnam its T-90 battle tank, six Kilo-class submarines, six Gephard-class frigates, Su-27s and MiG-30s.²⁹ Russia has also sold weapons to Thailand and the Philippines, and trains members of the Myanmar military.

26 Thomas Wilkins and Daisuke Akimoto, 'Japan signals more robust security posture in new defence white paper', *The Strategist* online, 29 July 2021 [accessed 12 August 2021].

27 Nivedita Kapoor, 'Russia's new national security strategy', *Observer Research Foundation* website, 7 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

28 Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2021*.

29 Zachary Abuza, 'The bear is back? Russia's return to Southeast Asia', *The Diplomat* online, 1 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

Australia took part in a meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on 29 June in Rome. Foreign Ministers at the meeting expressed concern about the Islamic State's steadily growing presence across the African continent.³⁰ While the Australian Government has clearly directed the Army to focus its attention and resources on the Indo-Pacific, there are several strategic reasons for the Army to continue tracking this developing situation. The oceans surrounding Africa are crucial for Australian trade and supply chains. It is critical for Australia to have alternative sea lines of communication in case an Asian-based conflict breaks out and the South China Sea, Philippine Sea, or Indonesian archipelagic sea lanes become contested and interrupted.

Africa is increasingly the latest frontier for the expansion of ISIS networks and affiliates. Whilst the immediate threat posed by ISIS has declined in the Middle East, the militant group has recently reinforced its position across much of Africa through a series of significant victories and new alliances. ISIS has taken control of territory across the Sahel, labelling this region the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This influence spans Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Mali. ISIS is also operating heavily in the Congo and Mozambique, a region that it has declared the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). This was the site of the Battle of Palma in April, a brazen siege that led to dozens of deaths.³¹ ISIS has affiliated with al-Shabaab in Somalia, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in the Sinai, and Boko Haram, although the Boko Haram stresses its independence and operates relatively autonomously.

Africa has become the locus of ISIS activities because the militant group can exploit poor governance and local grievances such as unemployment and corruption to garner support and perpetuate violence. Local security forces are ill equipped to prevent threats to security and stability. The situation is likely to worsen as Western nations scale down their counter-terrorism operations in Africa. After nearly a decade France has announced the withdrawal of its 5,000 troops from Mali by the end of 2021, and the United States has made clear that it plans to focus almost exclusively on major power conflict.³² These withdrawals have the potential to create a security vacuum in the region.

30 Jeff Seldin, 'Global coalition fears Islamic State expansion in Africa', *VOA News* online, 28 June 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

31 Christine Goldbaum and Eric Schmitt, 'In bid to boost its profile, ISIS turns to Africa's militants', *The New York Times* online, 7 April 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

32 Cai Nebe, '"Islamic State" poses growing threat across Africa', *DW* online, 15 July 2021 [accessed 11 August 2021].

ISIS establishing a firm foothold in Africa would have ramifications for ISIS networks in Australia's immediate region. Australia currently assists its regional neighbours in combating ISIS activities in their territories. If ISIS can institute a significant footprint or even a new 'caliphate' in Africa, ISIS leaders in the Indo-Pacific could harness the benefits of a transnational network spanning multiple regions and continents.

Conclusion

This Q3 Strategic Assessment can be characterised paradoxically as covering both consistency and change. The pandemic, its economic impacts and ongoing global issues with insurrection and terrorism reflect continuity and are congruent with previous assessments. The defeat in Afghanistan and the announcement of AUKUS reflect departures from the strategic orthodoxy of recent decades. Both herald significant changes to Australia's strategic circumstances and will require further analysis in order to appreciate their likely impact on the Australian Army and the broader ADF.

