

# This is going to be different: learning to live with Chinese power

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**Judith Wheeldon (Vice President, RSNSW):** “This is going to be different — learning to live with Chinese Power.” Our speaker is Professor Hugh White AO FASSA, Professor Emeritus of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University. Hugh spent much of his career in the Australian government. He was international relations advisor to Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Deputy Secretary for Strategy and the Department of Defence. As quite a young man, he was the founding director of Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and, from 2004 to 2011, he was head of the ANU Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. He has many publications, including *Power Shift: Australia’s Future between Washington and Beijing* 2010, *The China Choice: Why America should Share Power* 2012, *Without America, Australia’s Future in the New Asia* 2017, and *How to Defend Australia* 2019. I think we get a glimpse from those book titles and previous positions of what some of the interesting points, challenges, and controversies are going to be. All of it tempered by Hugh’s study in the 1970s of philosophy at the Universities of Melbourne and Oxford.

But from the idea that China is rising, and that this is shifting relationships among the countries of the world and challenging

us about our attitudes to China as well as to other countries, Hugh is suggesting that there will be changes in the relationships between America and China, and that denial by Americans of their proper role in the world is causing great difficulties. So how does Australia make its way in an Asia no longer dominated by our great and powerful friends? Hughes suggests that how we answer that question will do much to define us as a nation.

Since that was written in mid-2022, maybe there’s a new sentence or two. How has Putin changed the calculus and how has the recent Australian election changed that calculus? There will be a Q & A to add spice, if any is needed. And it’s going to be led by Emeritus Professor Christina Slade, a long-standing interlocutor of Hugh White from their Oxford days. Christina is the chair of the Society’s Programme Committee, which has brought us this event. Have your questions ready for the Q & A. Hugh, it’s all yours.

## A great new challenge

**Hugh White:** Well, thank you very much, Judith for that welcome and introduction, and thanks, Christie, for the invitation. Thanks everyone for coming. It is an honour to be here. What a remarkable thing it is that

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the transcript of a talk that Hugh White gave to the Royal Society on 6 July 2022, at the 1304<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Meeting and Open Lecture, in the Gallery Room, State Library of NSW.

this Royal Society has been going now for 200 years. I had to look twice when Christie sent me the notice and it said the 1304<sup>th</sup> OGM. I thought, that can't be right ... but then on second thoughts, maybe it could be. It is a remarkable achievement, and it seems fitting that we meet in this building — the State Library of NSW — which is, like this Society, a great symbol of the thirst for knowledge and the determination of those first generations who came here after European settlement to use that knowledge to shape the society that has evolved on this continent. They tried to frame the kind of society we have become to fit the unique circumstances we face here in this land in this part of the world. In many ways they — *we* — have succeeded, and the result is the broadly successful society we see around us. In some very important ways we have not yet succeeded. And of course new challenges keep appearing, requiring new responses, so that process has never ended, but continues to this day.

Tonight I'm going to talk about one of those new challenges: the radical change in Australia's international setting as the region around us is transformed by economic growth. That will ultimately require us to rethink the kind of society we have on this continent, in this part of the world, and to explore how it can adapt to the changing circumstances around us. I'm going to try and talk dispassionately about these issues, some of which arouse a fair amount of passion. Well, I say "dispassionately," but actually there are some aspects of my topic about which I'm pretty passionate myself, as you'll see.

My starting point is a very simple observation that obviously something big is changing in the way we Australians

see our place in this region. We've just been through an election which was more "khaki" than any election campaign since the "Vietnam" election campaign of 1966. By that I mean that questions of national security — geostrategy, foreign policy and defence policy — weighed more heavily in the election campaign than we have seen in almost sixty years. There are two reasons for that. The first is that our relations with China over the last five years, and especially in the last three years have become as bad as our relations have ever been with any great power since 1945. Indeed our relations have been as bad as we've ever known with a great power as important as China is today to Australia in so many dimensions of our national life. It's our biggest trading partner, a major source of immigrants, and the most powerful country in our region. So the fact that our relationship with China has dived as spectacularly as it has is itself a very significant thing.

But what makes this even more significant is that the collapse of our relations with China is part of something even bigger still. It is bigger chronologically, in the sense that as our political leaders on both sides of politics seek to explain to us what's going on, they compare things today to the 1930s — they reach back to the period before the most cataclysmic strategic crisis the world has ever seen, with a clear implication that the things we are seeing happening today potentially foreshadow a cataclysm of comparable scale. And I think they might be right. I'll come back to that.

But it's also bigger geographically. Last month, our prime minister, newly hatched from the electoral egg, emerged sort of blinking and a bit bewildered, it seemed to me, in Madrid, at a meeting of NATO.

It was an unprecedentedly large meeting of NATO, joined by four countries from the Asia Pacific including ourselves, in which NATO did something quite significant. It declared that China was a “challenge” to NATO’s security. So what we are seeing here in Australia in relation to China is seen in similar terms in Europe, and that resonates too with the crisis in Ukraine since the Russian invasion in February 2022.

That crisis has added to, amplified, and exacerbated all of the anxieties that we have in our part of the world about what’s going on. What I want to do is to explore this, to unpack it, to offer an explanation for what’s going on, and talk about how we work through this and what comes out the other side.

I think the best way to understand the big thing that is happening is to see it as a challenge to the global order. And by global order, I don’t mean anything very grand, I just mean the set of assumptions and expectations and rules — sometimes informal rules — which frame the way in which countries get on with one another. It’s a pretty hard thing to define in more precise terms, but it’s a very real thing. International relations don’t just happen in a vacuum. They happen within a set of expectations, like all human relationships, and the global order is the set of expectations and assumptions which frame the way in which states get on with one another. One of the most dramatic developments in our lifetimes was the collapse of the bipolar order of the Cold War, which had emerged in the late 1940s with a structural rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, and framed national relations around the world. After the Soviet Union collapsed, this order was replaced by a US-led unipolar order.

This was, at least for us — and when I say us, I don’t just mean Australia, but for the West at large — a very happy moment. We believed that we’d moved into a new global order based on the values and ideals and ideas which had characterised our societies. It appeared to be very broadly supported by America’s friends and allies: in Europe, in NATO, and across Europe as NATO enlarged, and in Japan. Arguably in India (I’ll come back to that) and in the whole gamut of what we call the West. But it was also a very strong expectation that it was going to spread beyond that — that a unipolar global order, in which the United States was the sole global power and exercised decisive strategic influence everywhere, and would promote the emergence of liberal democratic political systems and market economic systems around the world.

This was what Francis Fukuyama (1992) meant when he talked about the end of history. All of the debates about how to organise society and how to relate society to economics and so on appeared to be resolved by the emergence of this unipolar, US-led order. It promised, amongst other things, not just support for the values that we collectively as societies had developed and had promoted and believed in. It also promised an era of peace because, without the ideological contestation that we’d seen, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — witness the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War — there seemed reason to hope that all the world’s major powers would live together harmoniously. The idea was that because they all subscribed to the same basic ideas about the organisation both of their own societies and of the international community, they would find no particular reason to compete with

one another, let alone go to war with one another. Moreover, there was a degree of confidence that if major powers around the world did not willingly accept those ideas, they'd have America to answer to. It was assumed that America's power was going to be so preponderant that even great powers like China and Russia, if they ever contemplated contesting new post-Cold War order, would be deterred, because they would not dare to take the United States on. It is important to remember that from about the middle of the 1990s, people seriously started describing America as "the new Rome," as a country with unparalleled global preponderance in every dimension of national power. That was confidently expected to last throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As I said, this vision of a US-led and US-enforced global order was one that I and many others found very congenial. It's not that I love everything about America — I don't — but I prefer to have a US-led global order than many of the alternatives. We are seeing one of those alternatives right now. What we see in today's difficulties with China, and what we are seeing in the crisis in Ukraine right now, is the emergence of a new vision of global order to replace that post-Cold War vision, and that is happening because in several really crucial respects the assumptions underpinning that vision of global order turned out to be plain wrong. US power and the ideas it stands for are not unchallenged, despite the hopes and expectations of the optimists of the 1990s.

Of course those are not the only challenges that face the US-led global order. It faces challenges from within the United States itself, and I think not just from Trump, but I think more broadly from a reluctance of the US electorate to accept the

burdens imposed on them. And it also faces challenges elsewhere. It faces challenges in Britain: I think Brexit was, amongst other things, a rejection of some of the ideas and expectations and assumptions that underpinned that 1990s vision of order. The same might be true of some of what we saw in the recent French elections. But the challenges from within "the West," if I can put it that way, pale into insignificance compared to the challenges that are coming from these two powerful states outside the West. The unipolar order is being challenged right now by China and Russia, and how we address that challenge is the great question of international affairs today.

### **Two possible alternatives sought by Russia and China**

I think the best way to start thinking about that is to ask what the alternative order they seek is. If these guys don't like the US-led unipolar order that appeared to emerge at the end of the Cold War, what do they want instead? There are two possibilities.

The first possibility is that they want to replace the US-led unipolar order with a unipolar order of their own — one that that they lead, based not on the principles of liberal democracy and market economics, but on autocracy and "managed" market economics on the Chinese model. This is a widely-held expectation. It's the idea that Scott Morrison, when he was Prime Minister, referred to with the phrase "arc of autocracy." It's the idea that Joe Biden referred to when he spoke in his first State of the Union address about America and China being in "a contest for the 21<sup>st</sup> century." It's the idea that was expressed at the Madrid NATO summit when NATO said that China is challenging not just NATO's

security, but also its values and philosophy. The fear here is that that, just as a US-led unipolar order was expected to spread liberal democracy and free-market economics around the world, so a global order led by autocracies would spread their ideas around the world, threatening liberal values and political systems in Western societies like ours.

That set of fears and anxieties has become central to the way we in Australia, and those in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, think about China's challenge to the US-led order. There is a view that if that order is not preserved, then our own values and systems are under mortal threat. But that is not necessarily true. There is another way in which the international order could evolve in response to the challenge posed by Russia and China. Instead of moving from a US-led unipolar order to a China/Russia-led unipolar order, we move to a point halfway between these two extremes, with a multipolar order.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time unpacking that idea, but I just want to sketch it to you. Under a multipolar global order, no single power or group of powers — and no single ideology, or set of ideas — predominates. Instead there are a number of "great powers," each of them dominant in their own region or sub-region. The United States would be one, China would be one, India would be another. Russia, I think, is still an interesting question, but I think Russia would definitely be one. And Europe in some strange way — however Europe evolves as a strategic actor — would be one, and there might well be others as well. Each of those regional great powers would seek a sphere of influence, as great powers have always done. And they would seek to achieve

predominant influence over the countries in their immediate neighbourhood. How intrusive their predominant influence would be is an interesting question. It might vary from one region to another, but between them there'd be quite a lot of political diversity. Some of those great powers would be authoritarian or autocratic. Some of them would be democratic, some of them would be a mix of different elements. And between them there'd be a fairly constant pattern of contestation and rivalry. Such orders have been quite common in history, especially in Europe. How well they work depends a lot on how the contestation and rivalry between the great powers is managed. If it is well managed, the order can be quite peaceful, as it was in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. If it's ill-managed, the result can be very violent, as it was for much of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The view in Australia**

The predominant view in Australia, I think — and elsewhere in the West — is that we are not heading for a new multipolar order of the sort I've just sketched. Instead we are heading for a new unipolar order, the "arc of autocracy" model. Our response, not surprisingly, is very hostile — what I call "aggressively defensive." There's been a spontaneous, not very well-considered, view that the only possible response is to push back as hard as we can to preserve the US-led order, with all the vigour at our command.

I think there are two reasons for our determination to preserve the US-led unipolar order. One is the view that the ideals upon which that order is based are simply better — morally better and perhaps practically better — than the ideals underpinning

the authoritarian alternative. This sense that the old order is morally better has certainly been reinforced by the conduct of Russia in the Ukraine. I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about Russia and Ukraine, but the sense that there's a clear moral difference between "our" side and "the others" has been strengthened by the authoritarian turn in China over the last decade or so — think of events in Hong Kong and Xinjiang — and it has been even further amplified by the way in which Russia has conducted itself in Ukraine.

I want to offer a brief aside here about this, because the moral judgements we make about Ukraine are quite important to the way we weigh the alternative models of global order I have sketched. There is, I think, a distinction between Russia's ambition to assert a sphere of influence over its neighbours, on the one hand, and the way it has done so in Ukraine, on the other. Spheres of influence have a bad name, but it would be very hypocritical to brand them as inherently legitimate or immoral. America after all asserts a sphere of influence over the whole of the Western hemisphere. And we claim a sphere of influence over the Southwest Pacific. Spheres of influence are best seen as a perhaps regrettable but inescapable feature of the international system. What's objectionable about Russia's actions is not the fact that it is asserting a sphere of influence. It is that, firstly, it has tried to do that invading another UN-member country. There are a lot of ways of asserting a sphere of influence other than by invasion. And, secondly, the invasion has been conducted so brutally, with so much deliberate targeting of civilians especially.<sup>2</sup> Both of these

factors have rightly earned the harshest criticism, and they have affected the West's response to the invasion, and more broadly to the wider challenge to the post-Cold War order, not just by Russia but also by China. They seem to provide a moral imperative to defending that old order at almost any cost.

But that is not the only thing happening here. The moral imperative to preserve the status quo is underpinned by something more primal and less worthy — the sense that we want to defend what's ours. We in "the West" — especially the "Anglo-Saxon" West — feel that we deserve to lead the global order and frame the ideals on which it is based because we won the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War. That is how we built the US-led order, and we want to hang onto it.

I don't entirely decry that feeling. I can understand it. But it has consequences. It drives a determination to preserve the old US-led order at any cost. There is no doubt in my mind that the perpetuation of a unipolar order based on US primacy would be best for Australia and may well be, on balance, better for the rest of the world than any probable alternative. But that does not mean it is worth preserving at any cost, which is the belief which I think has been growing in America, and to some extent in Europe, and here in Australia in the last few years, and has been getting a lot stronger recently. Our response to the challenge posed by China and Russia is very emotional, very visceral, and I think that may be especially true here in Australia. And that is because there is perhaps more at stake for us than there is for other parts of the West in this contest, as we can see when

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<sup>2</sup> See Renwick (2023) The Russia/Ukraine conflict, *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of NSW*, December (forthcoming). [Ed.]

we narrow our focus from the global level to the regional level, and look at China's challenge to the US-led regional order in Asia.

In Asia the global challenge to the US-led post-Cold War order unfolds as a Chinese challenge to the US-led regional order. That regional order is not something that emerged at the end of the Cold War. It goes much further back, beginning — roughly speaking — in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century with Britain's victories in the Seven Years War which established Anglo-Saxon maritime primacy in the Western Pacific. That event, and the long era which it ushered in, is absolutely central to the Australian story, because it established the necessary pre-conditions for British settlement of this continent — and not just the initial intrusions onto the continent, but its subsequent occupation, development, population and defence. What Britain did on this continent — establishing the foundations of the society and the nation as we know it today — fundamentally depended on the fact that Britain was the dominant maritime power in Western Pacific. And the survival and flourishing of the society that flowed from British settlement here has always depended on the maintenance of either British or — after Britain faded — American primacy in the Western Pacific in the 245 years since then. So for us, what's at stake in the contest over the future regional order in Asia is not just a challenge to the global order that emerged thirty-five years ago at the end of the Cold War, but something much more momentous. It is the passing of the Anglo-Saxon regional primacy which we've regarded as necessary and sufficient for our security and the maintenance of this society on this continent ever since British settlement. Because that is what China's challenge to

America in Asia portends. Beijing wants to push America out of Asia and bring the long era of Anglo-Saxon maritime primacy to an end. That is why we in Australia find what is happening so threatening.

### **Our possible response?**

So what are we going to do about it? I'll focus here on Asia, though the way forward on Ukraine and Russia is very interesting too. There are two elements to the West's efforts to push back to China's challenge in the Western Pacific. The first is to play to our strengths by talking up our values, our economic and political achievements and our diplomatic weight. That's a matter of essentially asking countries around east Asia and the Western Pacific or the Indo-Pacific: who would you rather be dominated by? Us or them?

That might seem a pretty easy question for them to answer, but it's not that simple, partly because America and its allies no longer have the economic weight to win the economic element of that argument. But it's also not so simple because values are not enough. You need power, and in particular the hard edge of military power. It's important to recognise that, when great powers compete over an issue as big as the issue in question here — that is, which of the world's two stronger states will be the primary power in this part of the world — the contest takes on military connotations, almost from the outset.

That's not to say that it's necessarily going to be decided by a war. War between the US and China as they compete over the future leadership of East Asia is not inevitable by any means. But what is inevitable is that they will test one another's willingness to go to war as a way of measuring their respective

power and resolve. And that's why Taiwan looms so large, because Taiwan is likely to be the issue upon which the US and China end up testing one another's power and resolve. The US will seek to prove that it remains the strongest power in East Asia by either successfully deterring China from seeking to "retake" (as the Chinese would say) Taiwan, or by defeating it militarily if they fail to deter it. The Chinese conversely will seek to prove that they are now the dominant power in East Asia by showing that they can either deter America from intervening if China seeks to take Taiwan, or by defeating America if it does intervene.

This is a classic example of how great power contests unfold, and it doesn't always lead to war. It's perfectly possible that one side or the other will win that contest because the other backs off: that China wins the contest because America decides it's not worth the candle, or that America wins the contest because, as it's done successfully since 1949, it deters China from seeking to retake Taiwan. And that's the Taiwan test. It's not the only focus of their strategic competition — there is a real chance that we're going to see further contests in the South China Sea over things like long-range maritime patrol operations. But Taiwan is, I think, the most poignant, the most pressing, and it's helpful at least to focus on it for the purposes of the discussion.

### **The US or China?**

The key question, then, is who's going to win the battle of wills between the US and China? The assumption from our side that it's going to be us. That assumption is based on the assessments that the West has more power, that the United States is preponderant across that whole range of varieties of

national power that I mentioned before, that it is the "new Rome," and also that the United States and its allies have more will: that we are more determined to preserve the order than the Chinese are to overturn it. I think both of those assessments are wrong. That means it is much, much harder to deter China from testing the United States over Taiwan than we in the West understand, and it's much, much harder to win a subsequent war if we fail to deter them.

And that means it is much, much harder for the United States to preserve its primacy in East Asia. The reason for that is really fundamental. It is the rise of China's power. At one level we all know about that, but one of the challenges in understanding the choices we confront is that we've all been living with the rise of China for so long that we've stopped focusing on what a remarkable thing it is. The Australian government has published several of its own estimates of the raw economics. The most recent of them was published just a couple of months ago in a rather obscure publication by DFAT (2022), which didn't get any publicity. It gave Treasury estimates of the relative size of the Chinese and the American economies in purchasing-power-parity terms — which is the more relevant measure for strategic purposes— today and in 2035. Today, China's economy, according to these estimates, is 19% of global GDP and America is a 16%. But that's not the scary bit. The scary bit is in 2035, which in strategic terms is just the day after tomorrow, they're estimating that China's economy will be 24% of global GDP while America's will be 14%.

Now, I don't know about you, but I find that almost impossible to imagine. We all grew up with the idea that America is, almost by definition, the largest economy



in the world. But that just isn't true anymore, and by miles. It's not just that the Chinese snuck ahead by half a metre — they are streets ahead, overtaking America by a wide and ever-growing margin. And these are sophisticated calculations. Treasury are not making any sort of dumb straight-line extrapolations. They take into account the demographic challenges that China faces and the way in which China's economy is changing in composition as it matures. These are not extrapolations that can be brushed aside.

They really matter for the strategic future of Asia because, throughout history, strategic weight — power — derives essentially from economic scale. Why was Britain the world's strongest economy and the strongest power all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Because it had the biggest economy. Why was America the world's strongest power all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Because it had the biggest economy. We should not kid ourselves: those numbers mean that China is going to be, by a long chalk, the most powerful country in the world in the decades ahead. I think we do kid ourselves about that a bit. We somehow think that the laws of economic arithmetic don't apply to the Chinese as they do to us. That would be a very dangerous illusion indeed.

So we in the West can't rely on our economic weight to win the contest with China in Asia, nor on the charm of our diplomacy. It is going to come down to a contest of military power and resolve, deterring China or defeating it. That is made all the harder by the massive resources, including technological resources, that China can bring to bear. Now this is a big subject and I'm going to go over it very quickly.

It would once have been the case that the US would have won a war with China over Taiwan easily and quickly and cheaply. When I say "once" I mean as recently as 2000 or 2005 that would've been the case. By 2010 it was coming a bit harder to be confident of that judgement, and today it is very easy to be confident of the opposite judgment. Today the United States cannot expect to win a war with China over Taiwan because the Chinese have very effectively developed the air and maritime capabilities to deny the United States the capacity to project power to the waters around Taiwan, which they used to take for granted.

To understand what that means, it is important to understand what kind of war we are talking about. A war between the US and China over Taiwan would be the first serious war — not a little border clash but a serious war — between two great powers since 1945. It would be the first major maritime war since 1945. And it would be the first significant war ever between nuclear powers. So we haven't seen anything nearly as serious as this war would be, for a very long time, of ever. It would be a very new, very big, very different war from anything our generation has known.

When I say America cannot win that war, I do not mean necessarily that they will lose it as a conventional — non-nuclear — war. Most likely neither side would "win" that war. China cannot beat America, America cannot beat China. They can each fight one another to a standstill, and they could and would do that quite quickly. I think it would only take a couple of weeks — extremely costly weeks. America would lose lots of aircraft carriers (if they dared to deploy any into the theatre). They would lose lots

of aircraft and ships. China would lose a lot of aircraft and a lot of ships and would have its bases on the mainland of China attacked. So both sides would find themselves, after a couple of weeks, bloody but unbowed and very angry, and both would ask themselves, how can we break this stalemate?

I think it's pretty clear that that two sides both conclude that nuclear weapons provide the only option, and both sides, I think, would be seriously tempted to go nuclear. This may come as a surprise, but it should not. One of the things that's happened in the era of uncontested US primacy is that we've forgotten about nuclear weapons. With the end of the Cold War, the Cold War's nuclear confrontation dissipated, but the nuclear weapons didn't go away. Their numbers reduced, but the arsenals are still easily big enough to cause an unimaginable catastrophe. When it becomes clear to decision makers on both sides that neither side can win a conventional war, there is a very real chance that both sides would feel impelled to go nuclear relatively quickly.

That has big implications. The first and perhaps most important is that, perhaps paradoxically, it is harder to deter China from risking a military attack on Taiwan than many people assume. The probability that a US-China war would approach and perhaps cross the nuclear threshold makes the costs and risks to America of war over Taiwan very high, including the risk of nuclear attack on US cities. That in turn makes it less likely that America would be willing to fight that war, not matter how high the stakes appear to be. And that in turn means the Chinese are more likely to judge that America would decide not to fight over Taiwan after all. It is hard for US policymakers to convince the Chinese that

America would start a war with China over Taiwan that it can't win and that might go nuclear.

You might ask whether the same is not equally true of China? Wouldn't the risk of nuclear war deter the Chinese from attacking Taiwan just as much as it would deter the Americans from defending it — thus creating the kind of precarious but durable stability we saw in the Cold War? But there is a key difference here in the deep asymmetry of resolve between the two sides. This is one of the reasons why the present confrontation in East Asia, (and in a different way, the present confrontation in Eastern Europe) is different from the Cold War.

### **The Cold War was different**

What made the Cold War so stable and kept the peace between the superpowers is that the two sides had — and recognised that they had — very equal resolve to prevail on the issues between them. The Soviet Union was absolutely determined not to give an inch to the Americans, and the Americans were absolutely determined not to give an inch to the Soviet Union. They both knew that any attempt, even the smallest, by either of them to disturb the status quo between them on the key fronts — for example, along the Iron Curtain border between East and West running down the middle of Europe — would immediately bring them to the brink of nuclear war. Both sides were convinced that the other would be willing to fight a nuclear war to preserve the status quo on the central front between them, so neither side ever challenged it.

Why was that? World War Two ended with two countries vastly more powerful than any of the others — a bipolar global order. Both sides feared that this bipolar

order might become unipolar if the other side won a decisive advantage. This was a real possibility — either a unipolar order headed by the Soviet Union or a unipolar order headed by the United States — and both sides were determined to prevent that happening. In this the European central front was vital to both sides. One might think that the European central front mattered a great deal more to Moscow than to Washington, because the wide Atlantic Ocean lay between America and Europe. But in the Cold War the United States feared that if the Soviet Union was allowed to dominate Western Europe — which it could quite easily have done if the Americans hadn't been there — it would end up dominating the whole of Eurasia. Early in the Cold War there were no other real great powers that could rival the Soviet Union in Eurasia. In the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, India was very weak, Southeast Asia was very weak, China was in Russia's pocket until the Sino-Soviet split in the late 'fifties or early 'sixties.

So it was a very real fear in the United States that the Soviet Union could have dominated the whole of Eurasia if they dominated Western Europe. And they believed that any country that dominated the whole of Eurasia could threaten the United States at home in the Western Hemisphere — and only a country that dominated Eurasia could do that. Hence, as George Kennan (1947), the architect of US containment policy, said, America's "entire security as a country" is bound up with preventing the emergence of a Eurasian hegemon. Preventing that was really what the Cold War was all about for America, and it gave America a very powerful motive indeed to preserve the status quo on the Central Front — America's own

security depended on it, just as much as the Soviet Union's did.

### And today?

What does that mean for today? Whether America has the same imperative to defend Taiwan today as it did to defend Berlin and other points on the central fronts in the Cold War depends on whether its own security is at stake as it was in the Cold War. There are really two questions here. The first is whether a Chinese takeover of Taiwan would lead to Chinese hegemony in East Asia. I think the answer is very likely "yes," for reasons I won't elaborate here. The second is whether Chinese hegemony in East Asia would lead to Chinese hegemony over Eurasia, the way Soviet hegemony over Western Europe would have led to Soviet hegemony over Eurasia on the Cold War. If the answer to that is "yes," then America would have an extraordinarily powerful reason to stop China taking Taiwan, and just as America was prepared to "bear any burden and pay any price" to prevent the Soviets dominating Western Europe during the Cold War, including fighting a nuclear war, they would be willing to do the same thing in preventing China from dominating East Asia and the Western Pacific.

But is the answer to that second question "yes"? Could China go on from dominating East Asia to dominate Eurasia? I think the answer is almost certainly "no." The reason for that is there are too many other powerful states in Eurasia to stop it. There is very different from the distribution of power today than there was in the 1940s or 1950s, or even into the 1960s. Back then, India, Western Europe, and China were all very weak. Today a China that dominated East Asia would still face Russia, which remains

powerful despite its failures in Ukraine, and remains determined to preserve its status as an independent great power despite its “alliance” with Beijing. China would face Europe, which is strategically powerful, with a big population, a huge economy, very deep technology, nuclear weapons in the hands of a couple of member countries, and some very strong military traditions. All this makes Europe very formidable. Then there’s India, which is increasingly formidable, and it too has nuclear weapons. It has a capacity to disappoint, but it has 1.3 billion people. And it has an economy which, while not growing as fast as China’s did in its heyday, is growing fast enough to become to be the third, and soon the second, biggest economy in the world. This is a very different world from the one in which the Soviet Union threatened to dominate Eurasia. So the chances that China can go on from dominating East Asia to dominating Eurasia seems very low.

But what about the much-discussed alliance between Russia and China? I think this is overrated. Today their objectives align. Russia wants to re-emerge as a great power with a sphere of influence in what the Russians call its “near abroad.” That’s what Ukraine’s all about. China wants to re-emerge as a great power with the sphere of influence in East Asia and the Western Pacific. That is what is happening in Asia. Contesting US primacy in their respective regions gives Moscow and Beijing a strong common purpose today. But once that’s done, all the evidence of history and the laws of strategic geography tell you that these two countries are destined to be rivals. China is much more powerful than Russia on economic and demographic grounds, but Russia is determined not to be dominated by China, and is strong enough to resist it.

We should be careful not to make again the old mistake of underestimating Russia, and we can be confident that Russia’s power will help to balance and contain China’s.

And so I think that by far and away the most likely outcome is that, if or when China wins the contest with America in the Western Pacific and comes to dominate East Asia, it will not be able to dominate Eurasia, and will not therefore be able to go on to dominate the world in a unipolar China-led order. It will find itself running up against Russia, against India — which is determined to be a great power in its own right in South Asia and the Indian Ocean — and against united Europe. Plus there will still be the United States there as a backstop. This takes us back to the point I made earlier, about the relative probability that the old unipolar US-led global order will be replaced by a new unipolar China-led global order or a multipolar global order. The relatively even distribution of power globally between a number of great powers — China, America, Europe, India and Russia — makes multipolarity much, much more likely.

### **Implications for the USA**

This has very important implications for America’s position in Asia. If Chinese hegemony in East Asia and the Western Pacific is very unlikely to lead to Chinese hegemony over Eurasia and thence threatening to spread its dominion over the whole globe including America itself, then America does not have an overwhelming imperative to stop it dominating East Asia and the Western Pacific. It does not have the kind of imperative that drove it to being willing to fight a full-scale nuclear war to defend Berlin in the Cold War. It does not have the same imperative to fight a nuclear

war over Taiwan, because America's own security is not at stake the way it was in the Cold War. America can remain very secure in a multipolar global order, so what is really at stake for America over Taiwan is not America's security, but the dream of global leadership — the idea that America can preserve indefinitely the pinnacle of unipolar power that it seemed to have achieved after the Soviet Union collapsed. And how important is that really for Americans?

Of course it has great appeal for the policy elites in Washington. Being the global leader is a kind of neat thing for them and lots of people in Washington want to hang onto it. But once you get outside Washington into the "real" America, so to speak, it is very far from clear that many folks think that way. We know this because they voted for Donald Trump, who amazed the policy elites by winning office as president on a platform which simply repudiated US global leadership. The guys in the think tanks on Massachusetts Avenue still believe in all that stuff, but out there where the voters are, where the taxes have to be collected and the votes have to be counted, they don't buy it. They seem to be happy with the idea that America remains being an equal player in a multipolar order, not dominated by any other great power, secure in its own hemisphere and still dominating that hemisphere as it has done under the Monroe Doctrine since 1824. And it is not just Trump voters who think this way. Democrat voters do too. Joe Biden ran for office in 2020 on a slogan of "a foreign policy for the middle class." He said "Everything I do in foreign policy will be directed and will be shaped by asking the question, 'what does this matter to ordinary American families?'" That is Trump's "America First" with a different label. Are these people willing to fight

a nuclear war and risk nuclear attacks on US cites to defend Taiwan for the sake of US global leadership? I do not think so.

And not just me. One reason for the significance of the argument I have just been presenting is that this must all be clear to policymakers in Beijing. They too must understand that America's imperatives to defend Taiwan are not strong enough to justify a nuclear war, which means they may well judge that if and when the time comes, America will not fight. That makes the world very dangerous for two reasons. The first is they might be right — America might well back off, allow China to take Taiwan, and then we will end up then in an East Asia dominated by China. But the even scarier possibility is that Beijing might get that wrong. Despite the power of the argument I've offered you, it might still happen that at three o'clock in the morning, which is when these decisions always seem to be made, Joe Biden finds himself deciding to fight for Taiwan anyway. In fact Biden himself, in his muddled way, has repeatedly said that he would defend Taiwan, so we can't rule out the possibility that he means what he says.

### **Two very dangerous possibilities**

That is why we face *two* very dangerous possibilities. One is that the US, confronted with a direct military challenge from China, steps back and in effect abandons East Asia and the Western Pacific, leaving it to China. The second is that it doesn't step back, but throws itself into a catastrophic war it can't win, and its leadership in Asia is destroyed anyway. The implications of this are profound. It means that the US-led global order that I started talking described earlier, and which remains the lodestar of Australian

policy, will most probably not survive no matter what we do. America does not have the power or the resolve to sustain that order, because the global power distribution has turned out to be very different from the image people had of it when that order was conceived in the 1990s. Instead of America remaining unchallengedly preponderant in every dimension of national power indefinitely, we have seen in the decades since the end of the Cold War the biggest and fastest and most significant shift in the distribution of wealth and power in human history — bigger and faster even than the industrial revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. So we are living in a very different world than the one we expected.

### **And for Australia?**

So let me now return to the question of what this very different world means for Australia. The decline and probable collapse of US power in Asia comes as a profound shock, but not perhaps a complete surprise. For a long time, until quite recently, we immigrants to this continent have sensed that the Anglo-Saxon primacy on which we have depended for our security and identity here on the edge of Asia couldn't and wouldn't last forever. We at least half-understood, even as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that eventually Asia's power potential would be realised and we'd find ourselves in an Asia dominated by Asians. We always thought this was a long way off, beyond our lifetimes, but we understood that it must happen eventually.

But that understanding faded from the mid-1990s. That was partly both a cause and effect of the long prime ministership of John

Howard, for reasons I won't dwell on here. But more fundamentally it faded because the idea emerged of a perpetual, unipolar US-led order. We started to believe that American power would last forever. Now we've been taken by surprise to wake up twenty years later and discover that's not true, and we are very ill prepared for this. We still cannot shake our belief in American omnipotence, and we retain a deep confidence that America can defeat China, despite all the points I've made. As a result many of us believe that China is going to be easy to deter. Some of us think that if we just talk tough — I'm talking about you, Peter Dutton — the Chinese will back off and go back to accepting the US-led order the way they used to. And what's more, there's a belief that if the deterrence doesn't work, then Australia should support the United States in going to war with China with the aim of preserving the US-led order in this region and globally. I think that's wrong because it is not a war we can win.

This is a very important question that we have to think about very carefully. Most of us do not really recognise where our national debate on these questions is heading. Our political leaders on both sides of politics agree in saying that our strategic circumstances have deteriorated sharply. They agree in comparing our situation today with the late 1930s, and they invoke the "lessons of Munich"<sup>3</sup> to explain how we should react. They are, I think, telling us that they believe we should go to war with China if necessary to preserve the old US-led order, and most of us seem willing to go along with that idea without seriously examining what that war would mean, and what the alternatives are.

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<sup>3</sup> When Hitler was appeased at the Munich Conference in September 1938. [Ed.]

There are questions here that we need to think about much more carefully, given the points I have made about a war with China. It is a war we cannot expect to win, it could well be the worst war in history, and there is very little chance that it would lead to the outcome we want — preserving the US-led order in Asia.

Going to war with China would be an act of utter desperation. Under what circumstances might it be justified? That depends on what kind of future we'd face if the US-led order is not preserved. One could argue that it would be justified if the alternative was a China-led global autocratic order of the kind Scott Morrison conjured with his talk of an "Arc of Autocracy," which imposed China's political values and system on Australia. Then you might make an argument — though it wouldn't be an easy one — that the horrendous kind of war I'm talking about would be worth fighting, even when the chances of victory are so low. But I think you really can't make that argument if the alternative to the old status quo is not a China-led autocratic global order, but a multipolar order. Because in a multipolar order like that, there would be lots of space for countries like ours to make our own way and preserve our own system and values. It would be harder for us than living under US primacy, because US primacy has been a dream for Australia. That is one of the reasons we don't take foreign policy seriously enough — we have had no need to, because the world has worked so well for us. But can we survive and flourish in the kind of multipolar order which, I have argued, is far more likely than autocratic unipolarity? Of course we can.

### **A multipolar order**

What would that kind of order rally be like? Of course there is a lot we do not and cannot know, but there are some parameters we can sketch. The first and most important is that we will not find ourselves living under the shadow of one great power but of two, with China on one side and India on the other. We will be able to sit between them and play them off against one another to maximise our freedom to manoeuvre with them both, which is what smaller and middle powers do in multipolar systems. We are very well placed to do that because we sit right on the dividing line between their two natural spheres of influence — India's in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, and China's in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

The second parameter relates to the kind of great powers we will be dealing with. We need not assume that either China or India, as they exercise their prerogatives of great powers, are necessarily going to be territorially aggressive or highly intrusive in our domestic political affairs. Great powers are not all the same. Some have been very intrusive, like Stalin's Soviet Union in Eastern Europe in the 1940s and '50s. But other great powers haven't been like that, like America in the Western hemisphere. We have no real reason to fear that either China or India would be especially politically intrusive in their dealings with Australia, or other countries for that matter. We should assume we will face a "silent invasion." Or to put it another way, it will not be that hard for us to defend our way of life and our way of organising our society even in an Asia which is dominated by China and India.

The third point is that we would not be alone. There are lots of other smaller and middle powers in Asia with interests very like ours. They too are going to be living between India and China. They too are going to be trying to maximise their freedom to manoeuvre between them. There is going to be plenty of opportunity to cooperate with them. Some of them are going to be quite big and significant players — like Indonesia, which will be the fourth biggest economy in the world well before the middle of the century. There's a lot we can do with our neighbours collectively to manage the impact of Asia's great powers upon us when we can no longer rely on America to do so. Focusing on that is a much more promising way to build our future in Asia than continuing to sleepwalking our way into war with China.

### **Our foolish, risky strategy**

But our current politics and policies are heading in the other direction. Our two political parties have complete bipartisanship on this, and that has become more clear since the election. They both have very deep faith in America's capacity to solve our China problem for us by deterring or defeating China militarily. That is a very foolish, risky strategy. I therefore think we need to stop and rethink very deeply, and that is going to be hard for us to do. Not only do our own predilections and presumptions nudge us towards unthinking commitment to perpetuating the US-led order in Asia. The West as a whole, with which we still identify so strongly, are increasingly seeing things that way — as NATO is doing now, thanks to the crisis in Ukraine. We should not follow NATO's lead on this, or Washington's. We need to understand our own

situation better, and that is going to require better political leadership on this issue than we've seen for a long time. The need for that leadership could not be more urgent. We are living through the biggest shift in Australia's international setting since European settlement. It's going to profoundly change the way we live in Asia. And if we get it wrong, it will be devastating for our future. Thank you.

### **Discussion**

**Christina Slade (Councillor, RSNSW):** Look, thank you very much, Hugh, that's been an extraordinary *tour de force* of talking. It fills in some of this. You say, instead of helping America to manage the strategic transition in Asia wisely, we are encouraging Washington to confront Beijing in a test it cannot win. Well, you've made that very clear. We've had Anthony Albanese supporting that and saying on the sidelines of NATO that China is a danger. We've had Richard Marles talking about Taiwan. We've had Penny Wong pushing Australia's role in the Pacific. What should they be doing differently now?

**Hugh White:** Good. Yes. What should they be doing differently? Well, that's a very big subject, don't get me started, but the absolute first essential is this: our political leaders should start explaining to Australians the actual situation we face. The foundation of Australian policy on both sides of politics at the moment is that America is powerful enough to defeat China's challenge to the US-led order in Asia. But they must know that's not true. I mean, they publish those figures, 24% to 14%. I mean it's near as dammit to twice the size. It just defies the laws of strategic gravity that the United States could prevail over China in an issue in



which America's own most vital interests are not engaged in China's own backyard when China is inherently a much more powerful country. And until we start having a conversation about that fundamental shift in the distribution of wealth and power, which drives everything else, then we're not going to get anywhere. So that's the first thing we have to do.

The second thing we have to do is to start talking to America very differently, because at the moment we are encouraging America to think that we'll support them in trying to deter China, if that fails then trying to defeat China militarily. I think we underestimate how much that promise of support increases the danger of war by encouraging America to follow this path. Can we change the way America thinks by changing our position? I think we can. We tend to look at the US political and strategic system as a huge edifice, which is completely impenetrable, but it's not, actually. The number of people who actually make decisions in Washington DC on these issues is probably about a hundred, give or take. And Australia, believe it or not, actually looms quite large for them, partly because we're so bloody noisy on this issue. And, you know, we think that's great because they all nod and agree and slap us on the back and call us mates, because we absolutely support what they're talking about. But by doing that we are encouraging them to think that they're on the right track in trying to confront China.

And our enthusiasm — Peter Dutton's enthusiasm — for going to war with China will make it more likely that at three o'clock in the morning an American president will do that. And I think that is potentially very disastrous for us. So we have to go

to America and say something very bold. Because, if I'm right, my argument would be that we should be absolutely crystal clear that whatever else we do, we are not going to go to war with China to try and preserve US primacy, because it's a war they can't win.

The third thing we need to do is to go and talk to the Chinese and talk to them a bit differently. Not by saying, "oh, okay, you can have what you like" — that's the last thing you want to say — but you do want to go and start talking to them on the basis that we accept that, and recognise that, as the world's most powerful state, they are going to be much more influential in Asia than they have been in the past. And to start talking them through that.

And the last thing we need to do is to talk very differently to our neighbours because both sides of politics have made a big thing about regional diplomacy, talking to India, talking to Japan, talking to the Southeast Asians. But the way we have framed that is that we go to them and try to persuade them that they should agree with us about how to deal with China. In other words, our diplomacy in the region is to go and read America's talking points to our neighbours. And the fact is they don't believe it. I mean they just don't buy it. And so that undermines our credibility.

What we should do is do something a little bit different: to go to the region and start listening, because the Indonesians, the Singaporeans, the New Zealanders — interestingly, although it'd be interesting to see what just Jacinda Ardern says down there at the Lowy Institute tomorrow — are handling all the issues that we are dealing with, have the anxieties that we have, and sometimes more anxieties because they're closer to China. And yet they don't seem

to be digging themselves into the same hole that we are digging ourselves into. So I think we have a lot to learn from them.

**Peter Baume:** You held up the *Quarterly Essay* a few minutes ago. It's the most significant, important powerful *Quarterly Essay* I've read in years. Oh, thank you. And, I encourage everyone to read it. You talk about a multipolar world and you say we need a strong Russia as part of that multipolar world. How do we get a strong Russia?

**Hugh White:** Well, Peter, I'm not sure that's the problem. I think we've got a strong Russia, we just need to work out how to live with it. And that's not easy. This is because, as I say, the way in which Russia has sought to establish its sphere of influence over Ukraine is literally inexcusable. Both because it's invaded, which it didn't need to do. And because it's invaded in such a brutal manner. There's a lot we don't understand about what's happened in Ukraine since February 2022. But the extent to which the Russians have deliberately targeted civilians makes no military sense to me at all. I mean, why waste the resources blowing up people's apartment blocks? There's something very odd about that.

But the proposition that Russia is going to have — and we can't stop them having — a sphere of influence in their “near abroad,” I think that's something we have to learn to live with. So let me give you a really scary analogy. The last time the world tried to build a multipolar order was in 1945 when, at the end of the Second World War, nobody thought there was going to be a unipolar or, for that matter, even a bipolar order. What they thought was going to happen was that there was going to be a multipolar order with five great powers — there's still the

Permanent Five (P5) in the Security Council — and they were clearly going to be at the top table. They were clearly going to be the ones who decided how the world was run. The rest of us smaller and middle powers just had to sort of fit in round the edges.

Luckily, thanks to H. V. “Doc” Evatt amongst others, there was an institutional structure to do that in the UN. But it was clear that those five great powers were going to be the ones that really counted. And in order to make that work, Roosevelt in particular had to make some real concessions to Moscow. That's what happened at Yalta in January 1945. And the heart of the deal was, “okay, you can have Eastern Europe as long as you are prepared to accept this multipolar structure,” and Stalin said “yes.” Two ways of reading that: one is that it did actually work in the sense that it established those two very rigid spheres of influence, which the Cold War never violated. It was a terrible outcome for the Poles, and if you go to Poland and talk about Yalta you'll get a lot of very strong views expressed. And I understand that. But if you actually look at the choice that Roosevelt faced, with the Red Army on the outskirts of Berlin — by far and away the most powerful army the world had ever seen — Roosevelt had to ask himself, “well, am I going to go to war, once we've defeated the Nazis, have another war with the Red Army?” And we know how the Red Army would've beaten the rest of us cold. Because they beat the Germans. The Wehrmacht was really powerful, a very strong army. But they were no match for the Red Army, and neither was the West at that time. So would we fight a war to defend Poland, which we wouldn't win and which would've devastated Poland? Would the Poles have been better off? No.

We face the same kind of choice today actually. I think the problem we have in Ukraine is that Russia has behaved repugnantly. But the idea that we can push Russia out of Ukraine and humiliate it and push it back and turn it into a middle-sized power is not going to happen. So we're going to have to learn to live with a powerful Russia, and that's going to require us to make some compromises we really badly don't want to make, just as learning to live with a powerful China is going to require us to make some compromises in Asia that we really don't want to make, including concessions — I think compromises is a too glamorous a word for it — about the future of Taiwan. And you know, if that feels icky and horrible and morally compromised, well, welcome to power politics, because remember what's on the other side is nuclear war and, you know, peace is value too. Sorry, long answer, but good question.

**Steven Burns?:** Russia's economy is just slightly bigger than Australia's. This Ukrainian development was essentially the last European imperialist war. So Russia is trying to expand its territory. I don't believe Russia will still be a great power because its economy is nothing like China's, which is a multi-trillion dollars. My two questions are: one, we talk about China as being an integral bulwark — the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), et cetera. How long do you think the current president will be in power? Because he's made lots of enemies internally in China, and I think one of his first major mistakes is the fact that he's made Zero COVID as the policy, which shows he's not omnipotent and all-seeing. It starts to raise questions in the Chinese population and also in the CCP. The second question is, would the attempt to invade

Taiwan even with minimal US support be far too expensive for China? It's a big strait of water and Taiwan is armed to the teeth with missiles and all sorts of munitions and will just make it too expensive for China to invade Taiwan.

**Hugh White:** I'll be as quick as I can. Look, you're absolutely right about Russia economically, and I'm conscious that I'm going to say will contradict what I said before about the economy being the foundation of national power. But there's something odd about Russia, and part of it is its sheer geography. One of the things that Russia has going for is that it's so big that it's a local power in four completely different parts of the world at once. And that does seem to make a big difference. The second is that, of course, there are an awful lot of things that Russia can't do because it doesn't have a big economy, but it does have 1500 active-service nuclear weapons and probably another six or seven thousand back in the warehouse. And if you'll forgive this technical, strategic term, when the shit hits the fan, that really counts for something.

So Russia is a very strong defensive power. It has a great capacity to resist other countries intruding onto it, but that is not all. Russia at the time of Napoleon was economically relatively weak. All it had was a very big population. But it's worth remembering that after Napoleon retreated from Moscow in 1812, the Russians advanced, and by 1814 they'd occupied Paris. There's something creepy about Russia. I think you've got to be very careful of it, and I do think it's strong enough to resist Chinese hegemony, whatever its other weaknesses are.

Your second question was about Xi Jinping. I don't speak Chinese. I'm no sort of a sinologist. A lot of my colleagues at ANU

are, and I spend quite a lot of my time sitting at their feet asking dumb questions and trying to understand the answers. So I'm not going to do more than reflect other people's views on Xi Jinping's predicament. Of course, it's always possible, in a highly autocratic structured system, that he gets thrown out. I wouldn't disagree with that for a moment. But the CCP is a remarkable institution and the instruments of control that Xi seems to be in charge of look very robust. So I wouldn't bet anything on the proposition that he goes quickly.

But I also don't believe his going would make much difference. Xi's personality, his manner, his political persona obviously have done something to affect the tone of things over the last decade. But whoever was leading China at the point at which China's economy overtook America's the way it has would be seeking to do exactly what Xi Jinping's trying to do. I find it very hard to imagine that an alternative would necessarily be much easier for us to deal with. The point about COVID Zero is a very interesting one because I've developed the working hypothesis that most of the time the CCP in their own lights gets things right. They proved to be remarkably effective at managing to deliver what they want. And I look at the Zero COVID policy, I think that just looks dumb. So maybe they're just screwing it up. But whether that undermines the whole credibility of the Party and endangers Xi Jinping's position, I'm just not sure. It could be, but I think in the end that's not going to be a game changer.

On Taiwan, here are two points. The first is that the Chinese don't have to invade Taiwan in order to subjugate it. They can blockade it. Blockade, most of the time, particularly against continental powers, is

a pretty useless strategy. But against a very trade-dependent island economy, situated a stone's throw from the Chinese coast — if you wanted to set up an abstract model for the perfect blockade scenario, Taiwan is it.

And the second point is that the Taiwanese are not armed to the teeth. Consider their strategic situation. They spend the same proportion of GDP on defence as we do. They spend 2%. Now, if they spent 5% the way the Singaporeans do, then I'd start to take them seriously. I don't actually think the Taiwanese are very serious about their own defence, and I don't think it's very hard for the Chinese to overcome the defences that the Taiwanese have. It wouldn't be easy in the sense that there'd be lots of casualties, but I don't see anyone in Beijing worrying much about that. I think they could do it. The slightly stronger question is how hard would it be for them to suppress opposition in Taiwan once they had controlled the territory? Controlling the territory is one thing. Controlling the population is another. All I can say is that the Chinese seem very confident that they can do it, and, if anybody can do it, they can, because they are very experienced at political oppression. So I think it'd be very ugly. I think it'd be tragedy. I have a lot of admiration for what Taiwan's achieved, particularly since the mid-'90s, economically and technologically, but also politically, and culturally. But I wouldn't want to bet that they would stand up in front of Beijing.

**Des Griffin:** Thank you for your talk. I was concerned that the frame of reference seemed to be one of conflict. One could ask what happened to the United Nations. The other point is that the context really seemed to be 800 years ago in Italy, the time of Machiavelli and the Prince. Now,

you remember in the film *The Third Man* where Harry Lime in that amazing scene in the elevator was asked about that and the matter of peace. And he just said, “In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, and they had 500 years of democracy and peace. And what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”<sup>4</sup> Now, I mean, I don’t understand if we can afford this contestation and all the rest of it. Think of the difficulties and challenges we really face. We’ve seen some of them in the last few months: climate change, water, energy, pandemics, even getting on with one another. I mean, are we really going to carry on the same way as we did 800 years ago? Because that is how far we’ve come.

**Hugh White:** Well, two points to make. The first is you’re absolutely right. One of the many reasons why it’s so important to avoid a conflict over the future order in Asia and globally is precisely that that gets so badly in the way of dealing with all sorts of other problems, including climate change. And I think there are other reasons like nuclear war. But, you know, the fact that there are so many other things to be dealt with just amplifies the point. The reality is that states still behave very much the way states always did because people still behave very much the way people always did. It might be surprising and disappointing to discover that we haven’t learned much. But what strikes me is that our political leaders — and not just in Australia — are sailing into a confrontation which has a very high risk of

conflict with all the same ideas and indeed with less historical consciousness than we sailed into the First World War and the Second World War. And so I join you in deploring it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen. And, given that’s a looming risk is something we need to manage rather than just pretending that it’s something we should consign to history.

**Christina Slade:** As Judith said, it’s nearly half a century ago we were young philosophers. What you brought, I think, Hugh, is the analytic skills and the clarity of language from the philosophical background of that half a century working on strategic defence issues. That’s been really illuminating. But what’s also important to me is the even-tempered approach. This is not an area, as you say, where emotions go. I think that the lesson that you are telling us is that we can’t any longer rely on the US as a global power. And that we need to be thinking seriously about whether the US would come and bail us out as the Brits failed to in Singapore. That said, giving up being a global power is really hard.

And we see that looking at what’s happening in Russia and Ukraine right now. To my mind we’ve seen it in some of the kerfuffles in the United Kingdom: coming to terms with not being a global power. And I wonder whether, to some extent, what we are seeing with China is compensating for the loss of their global power two centuries ago. And it’s going to be very hard for us all to go through this. I think it’s pretty hard for us as well, because we’ll have to negotiate. What I want to say is if there’s anything that philosophers should be committed to,

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Greene was the script writer, but said that Orson Welles himself wrote this line. Welles recalled, “When the picture came out, the Swiss very nicely pointed out to me that they’ve never made any cuckoo clocks — they all come from the Schwarzwald in Bavaria!” [Ed.]

it's reasoned and calm debate, and to the Society's own motto, *omnia quaerite*. We have to keep questioning, we have to keep having these debates and we have to do it in a good-tempered, reasoned and evidence-based fashion.

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