

Security Not everyone in the Australian policy community is a true believer in the certainty, and longevity, of US alliance protection, writes **Gareth Evans**.

Australia can't rely on US to save it from China

lenge; and that the situation demands a defence and foreign policy response that is better resourced than has been the case in more complacent decades past.

The particular security concerns that are broadly shared across the Australian policy community are familiar enough, shared as they also are across most of our wider region. In the case of China, concerns extend to its international law-defying territorial ambition in, and militarisation of, the South China Sea, with its "nine-dash line" this year expanded to 10; its repeatedly stated determination to unify Taiwan with the mainland, not excluding the use of force, in a context where its repressive actions in Hong Kong have made reunification on a "one country, two systems" basis a non-starter; its continued assertiveness on other territorial fronts with Japan and India; its efforts to increase its presence and influence in smaller but strategically significant regional players, including the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste; and its transition from a bystander to regular spoiler role in the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral contexts.

hile there is a measure of agreement among Australian policymakers, and those who influence them, about the

severity of regional security challenges we will face in the years ahead, serious divisions persist between government and opposition, within the wider think tank, academic and media policy community, and to some extent within the Albanese government. They relate to the extent and imminence of the security threat posed by China under Xi Jinping; the wisdom of further deepening Australia's alliance dependence on the United States; how we should be prioritising our defence preparedness; and how much weight we should be giving to diplomacy over defence.

And they persist notwithstanding the Albanese government's successful stabilisation of our deeply fraught bilateral relationship with China, culminating in the prime minister's visit to Beijing in November, and the easing of US-China tensions accomplished by Xi and US President Joe Biden in their meeting at last month's APEC summit.

Not all is discord. There is little disagreement within the Australian policy community that the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific regional security environment in 2024 and beyond will continue to be fragile and volatile; that negotiating a course between the two neighbourhood giants, China and the US – our major economic partner and security ally respectively – will continue to be our most formidable international chal-

Above all, there is anxiety – compounded by Beijing's manifest determination to challenge the nature and extent of the US security presence in the region – about the very significant expansion and modernisation of its military, including nuclear, capability. **Continued 6R**

ILLUSTRATION: DAVID ROWE

From 1R

Australia can't rely on US to save it from China

In the case of the US, the increasingly alarming vagaries of its domestic politics have created concerns across the board about its will and capacity to stay the course in its long self-appointed role as regional security stabiliser and balancer, particularly given its distractions elsewhere with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in the Middle East; also about its retreat from the open trading policies that have contributed so much to the region's economic prosperity, and consequent stability.

Concerns about US reliability have particular resonance in the context of North-East defence minister Stephen Smith, and there is a degree of scepticism as to just how might restart negotiations over nuclear risk stances in our region for decades". reduction; and where South Korea (and even

deterrent remains a serious option. point, is not imminently likely, but can never cyber firepower be entirely ruled out, given the Modi governand inflaming extremist religio-nationalist sentiment of its own.

solidarity of the Australian security policy community is the desirability, and credibility, of acquiring a fleet of eiaht or more nuclear-propelled submarines. Below: Security officials from the region are escorted by a Chinese honour guard at Xiangshan Forum in October. PHOTOS: ADF, AP

Echidna strategy.

issue testing the

The biggest defence

most of the Australian policy comthat nations can sleepwalk into war, even with any timeliness. when rational, objective self-interest on all sides cries out against it.

mainly for domestic political consumption, Small provocations, economic or otherwise, can generate an escalating cycle of larger can escalate into a full-blown arms race. With more nervous fingers on more triggers, small incidents can rapidly escalate into major crises. And major crises can explode into all-out war - creating, in this nuclear response should be.

Australia will need – whatever the state of our US alliance – to spend more on building our own military self-reliance. But how much more, and on what assets, remains contested



Asia, where North Korea continues to expand released in April 2023, began – but by no much time and attention we should be about the possibility of peaceful solutions its nuclear arsenal and engage in other milit- means completed – the task of defining the devoting to ASEAN itself, as a collective ary provocations; where neither Seoul's new kind of expanded and refigured capability organisation. government nor Washington have shown Australia will need in response to what it any interest in diplomatic concessions that described as "the most challenging circum-

The review focused on the need to build Japan, though to a much lesser extent) has longer-range "defence by denial" capability, able. But it has proved frustratingly made clear that acquiring its own nuclear with less emphasis on land warfare, vulnerable surface ships and defence of the contin-Indo-Pacific's other perennial security flash- through enhanced air, underwater and any kind of collective resistance to over-

There is little disagreement about the ment's demonstrated capacity to inflame need for the Australian defence porcupine that giving new substantive ballast and subdominated government in accommodating to just how long and strong and unequivoc- will require much more creative energy our differences wisely' ally self-managed some of those guills really need to be – above all the nuclear-powered submarines promised by AUKUS (further ▼ he unhappy reality – and this per- discussed below). And there is still plenty of ception is, again, shared across scepticism - historically well-founded - as to whether we are really prepared to pay for made with the publication in September of munity, as around the region - is needed new capability, and able to deliver it the Moore report: Invested: Australia's co-operation rather than confrontation. All

ASEAN continues to be a supremely important defuser of cross-border tensions, making violent conflict between its members, so common in the past, now unthinkincapable of helping redress catastrophic human rights violations in some of its memweening behaviour by China.

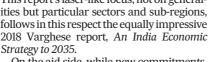
going into building trade and investment programs for those countries still needing such support.

A good start on the former front has been Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040.

Bellicose nationalist rhetoric, designed There is little disagreement about the need can generate over-reactions elsewhere. for the Australian defence porcupine (or, in our case, echidna) to have more and sharper reactions. Precautionary defence spending quills. But there is a real issue as to just how long and strong ... they need to be.

Second, it is broadly uncontested that we This report's laser-like focus, not on generalcipants but life on this planet as we know it. attention consolidating and building – or follows in this respect the equally impressive All these shared concerns translate into a rebuilding, as the case may be – bilateral 2018 Varghese report, An India Economic degree of agreement – but only a degree – relationships in the region with key regional Strategy to 2035. across the Australian policy community as neighbours, especially Indonesia, but also ments partners Malaysia and Singapore, announced in August as part of a thoughtful First, accepting that defence preparedness and Japan, South Korea and India. And also new policy document, Australia's Interna- capture risks of its Belt and Road Initiative intent, there is a general recognition that policy has been a significant turn-off for our recent years. island friends

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and, particularly, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, have received deserved praise for their sustained personal commitment in this respect. The Defence Strategic Review initiated by The ASEAN-centred regional dialogue the Albanese government, authored by for- architecture - EAS, ARF and all the rest mer defence chief Angus Houston and remains, properly, an important focus, but



On the aid side, while new commitments,

With official development assistance at tralian diaspora. just 0.19 per cent of gross national income, we are now among the least generous of OECD donors – and badly need to reverse that trend if we are to have any serious credentials as a good international citizen.

2017, to command quite strong support stabilising bilateral relations, had not "fun notwithstanding

contribute usefully to its longevity.

As encouraging as all this more or less defence if attacked. common ground may be, the reality is that But beyond that, the ground is indeed con-

preparedness. In each case, the division can be broadly – but crudely, because of course there are exceptions in both camps - put this

On one side, there is the defence and inteligence community and those think tanks and media which sail with it - above all the largely Defence-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Murdoch press passim, and a strident section of The Age/The Sydney Morning Herald/Nine media empire (publisher of this masthead) – which tend to a pessimistic view of the threat environment and a disposition to approach most problem-solving through a primarily militarv lens.

On the other side, there is the foreign policy constellation of current and former plomats, and academic, think tank and nedia analysts and commentators (including me), who tend to be more optimistic and who are more willing to champion diplomacy, dialogue and co-operation as the path to them. This divide remains very pronounced in the case of China. Since the change of government, Albanese and Wong have been keen to downplay the all-toocommon talk under their predecessors of "drums of war" beating.

Wong's speech to the National Press Club Conflict between India and Pakistan, the ent, and more on distant forward defence ber states, above all Myanmar, or offering in April clearly spelt out the new tone when she said that we should "not waste energy with shock or outrage" at China using its It is also well understood and accepted great and growing strength and international influence to advance its national anti-Muslim religious sentiment and the (or, in our case, echidna) to have more and stance to some of these crucial, but so far interests, but rather "co-operate where we track record of Pakistan's military- sharper quills. But there is still a real issue as underdone, regional bilateral relationships can, disagree where we must, [and] manage

> Albanese has made clear in multiple state ties, and also more generous and focused aid ments through the course of the year including at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, the East Asian Summit and the G20 meeting – his own strong commitment in this context to dialogue and diplomacy, to that bore fruit in the resumption of bilateral relations formalised by Albanese's visit to Beijing in November to mark the 50th anniversary of Gough Whitlam's icebreaking.

But that softer tone, for all its obvious rewards, has not found much favour with many in the defence and intelligence community, who continue to fulminate privately, and occasionally publicly (as with Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy raging against "appeasers" in the context of the AUKUS debate at the ALP National Conference in August, and ASIO head Mike Burage, existential risks not only for its parti- need to spend more diplomatic time and ities but particular sectors and sub-regions, gess in October blasting Chinese intellectual property theft as the worst "in human history") about the scale of China's military build-up, the imminence of the military threat it poses to Taiwan, the reality of its to what our defence and foreign policy Vietnam, our Five Powers Defence Arrange- focusing very much on the Pacific, were determination to build Pacific bases potentially threatening Australia, the state should be governed by potential adversaries' in the Pacific, where the previous Coalition tional Development Policy, the total Austra- the perfidy of its industrial espionage, and capability rather than their perceived hostile government's largely denialist climate lian spend has been falling dramatically in the alarming extent of its influence operations, not least within its now very large Aus-

> ll this is regularly fuelled by alarmist statements from the Coalition opposition, which has made a meal, historically, of Third, although it has its critics on the claiming Labor to be soft on communism fringes, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and weak on defence. Its home affairs bringing together the US, Japan, India and spokesman was quick to claim that Alban-Australia - continues, since its revival in ese's Beijing visit, for all its evident success in across the Australian security policy com- damentally changed anything underneath munity, albeit more for its optics than any the surface". Tension within the governreal military substance, joint naval exercises ment is well contained for now, but remains capable of boiling up at any time

> While the Quad is unlikely to evolve into a Tension is also present, and growing, on fully fledged military alliance, not least the question of Australia's relationship with because of India's inhibitions about so posi- the US. There is no serious inclination anytioning itself, the new grouping has great where to walk away from the ANZUS allicombined military clout, and simply by its ance, with a general recognition of the existence sends a very clear signal to Beijing benefits we continue to derive from access to that any significant further adventurism in intelligence, high-end weaponry and techthe region may be met by a more muscular nology (with the second tranche of AUKUS, and united push-back than it would like. going to co-operation on AI, electronic war-Recent moves to give the Quad a greater fare, hypersonic and underwater capabilitnon-military focus, with co-operative initiat- ies and the like, seen as particularly ives on health security, clean energy, significant in this respect), and the deterrent regional connectivity and the like, should utility of the prospect – not guaranteed, but not to be ignored – of the US coming to our

> there remains in Australia much that is tested. There are those who are true believhighly contested within the security policy ers in the moral exceptionalism of the US, community, going to the three quite funda- the indispensability of its continued ecomental issues of how we should be position- nomic and military primacy in maintaining ing ourselves in relation to China, the United both global and regional peace and good States and - in that context - our defence order, and the certainty of its military com-

t should take. straddler



But there are many in the Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles is closest to a true believer. Albanese, while comfort- of war". able enough talking Washington talk - not

tries benefit from strategic equilibrium".

think that Washington would risk losing Los reasons. than assets, regaining the presidency.

seems wildly overdrawn.

divide Australian opinion.

more sceptical on all these fronts. And there earlier, Peter Dutton – then Coalition are those who strive to keep a foot in both defence minister and now Opposition camps. While the Coalition parties remain Leader – said in 2021 that it was "inconceivpretty much the full response spectrum is military action it chose to take. Marles made

But there is a strong view within a large sec- nerable than the SSNs? least on state visits, like that very seamlessly tion of the ALP that if it did come to a fight, carried out in October - is an instinctive and one unprovoked by Taiwan, while it would be a tough call not to join in the Wong, while always cautious, is more defence of a fellow thriving democracy, that inclined to scepticism, particularly on the siren call should be resisted. The argument is attractions of continued US primacy, being that Taiwan has always been a special case, play that part well. very explicit in her April National Press Club its sovereignty never recognised internationand no country is dominated ... and all coun- suffer if drawn into war at any level.

rush to our military defence if we are ever nuclear-propelled submarines, under the basically unanswered. seriously threatened, or only do so if its own AUKUS agreement with the US and United national interests are also directly at stake. Kingdom. Signed by the Morrison coalition AUKUS project, increasingly being articu- for most of the last three decades. There is a particularly strong case for government in 2021, and embraced without lated at least within the more sceptical end of Many of us are hoping that diplomacy will scepticism in the case of our reliance not just any evident reluctance by the Albanese the policy community here, is whether by so – as the Albanese government has signalled on US extended deterrence, but extended government in 2022, the agreement has comprehensively further yoking ourselves to by its early actions – no longer be confined to nuclear deterrence: it defies credibility to come under fire domestically for three main such extraordinarily sophisticated and sensit- a second fiddle role; that the kind of extraor-

clearly regards allies as encumbrances more answerable. The boats will not be nuclear-military support. Beijing taking military advantage of Wash- protocols seem close to conclusion.

ington's preoccupation with Russia in A much more compelling domestic criti- world – and American pressure – works. would seem to outweigh any possible the 2050s for the last... if all goes to plan) – is Americans ever believe they need them?

mitment to Australia's defence, and who are rewards. That said, the prospect of an inva-whether these boats, for all the undeniable prepared to follow it down almost any path sion – however remote – will continue to advantages over conventionally powered security policy community who are much secretary of state Richard Armitage 20 years way) undetectability, really are the optimal choice for Australia's defence needs.

Would not we be better served by spending the same or less money on getting, much more or less unanimous true believers, able that we wouldn't support the US" in any sooner, a much larger fleet of conventional boats, many more of which could be simulover the next few decades - be no more vul-

> add-on to US underwater capability in tion has not been concentrating. the South China Sea, they can no doubt

speech about Australia's national interest ally in the same way as Kuwait's or Ukraine's, continental Australia, and our Indo-Pacific October the idea of building new-generation lying, above all, in our living in a multipolar and that Australia has little or no capacity to sea lanes and communication systems, from submarines in Adelaide as a financially region – one "where no country dominates, influence the outcome, but a great capacity to attack, could we not be as well or better served by a larger, much earlier deployed, is that if the whole AUKUS project falls over, The biggest defence issue of all testing the conventional fleet? How much value is as it well might in the next year or two, we A cutting-edge issue - though one on solidarity of the Australian security policy really added, here as elsewhere, by moving have no obvious fallback plan B. which the commentariat is much more community, and likely to do so for years to from a posture of defence of our continent inclined to be frank than any politician – is come, is the desirability, and credibility, of and archipelagic surrounds to one of distant whether the US will really feel obliged to Australia acquiring a fleet of eight or more forward defence? These questions remain

One context in which alliance-related ten-lifetime-sealed, requiring no refuelling or tralian flag means just that, and that we will both regional and global security issues. sion could clearly explode is if China were to any Australian production of possibly retain complete operational independence attack Taiwan. This is not inconceivable, divertible fissile material; and IAEA negoti- in the use of these boats, whatever the conalthough much of the speculation about ations to establish effective new safeguards text. But my own experience as foreign minister tells me that is not quite the way the from 1988 to 1996, president of the Brussels-

ated cost of up to \$368 billion over the next gress anxious about depleting US combat the Australian National University, where he is China's long-term ambition to regain Tai- 30 years of the proposed SSN submarine capability can be persuaded to exempt Aus- now a distinguished honorary professor. wan is clear, but the downside risks of taking program, and the gravity-defying delivery tralia from its International Traffic in Arms precipitate and unprovoked strike action – timetable (the early 2030s for the first US Regulations if it does not believe the nuclear- This is an edited version of an article first for both its internal prosperity and stability, boat, a decade later for the first new jointly powered submarines it sells us will be on published in Council for Security Co-operation and its wider international reputation – designed and built boat, and sometime in call at the click of a presidential finger if the in the Asia-Pacific Regional Security Outlook

These criticisms of the desirability of the AUKUS submarine program may well be boats they bring in range, speed, endurance subsumed by rapidly growing concerns Echoing a statement from then US deputy underwater, firepower and (for now, any- about its basic credibility, now coming from all sides, including - interestingly - some of its most fierce and longstanding supporters.

There is real doubt as to whether the US Congress, in its present mood, will ever support the sale of three - let alone a possible five - Vanguard submarines to Australia or evident within the Albanese government. clear his own view in October that Australia taneously at sea, and which may well – with anyone else. And, given the history of all "cannot be a passive bystander in the event expected advances in detection capability three countries in meeting design-and-build Australia's climate targets for complex new defence assets – and | policy has been a there are few if any more complex than nuc- significant turn-off lear submarines – anyone who thinks the f the role of the AUKUS boats is to be a second phase of this project has any more | friends in recent useful, albeit numerically marginal, chance of proceeding smoothly to comple-

> Even former Coalition foreign minister Alexander Downer, famously defensive of But if their primary purpose is to protect all things South Australian, described in untenable fairytale. And the unhappy reality

> Such, many of us would argue, are the consequences of allowing essentially free rein in security policymaking to hardliners in the defence and intelligence community, The remaining big concern about the as has essentially been the case in Australia

ive US military technology, Australia has, for dinarily productive co-operative relation-Angeles to save Sydney, or for that matter The first, which also has had some inter- all practical purposes, abandoned our capa- ship between Defence, Foreign Affairs and Seoul or Tokyo. And scepticism on all these national buy-in in the neighbourhood and city for independent sovereign judgment – the intelligence agencies that existed for fronts will certainly accelerate in the beyond, goes to its implications for nuclear not only as to how we use this new capability, most of the Hawke-Keating government unhappy event of Donald Trump, who non-proliferation and is the most easily but in how we respond to future US calls for years can be recreated; and that Australia will again play the creative and constructive armed; their propulsion units will be The government response is that an Aus- middle power role we have in the past on

But we are not holding our breath.

Gareth Evans was Australian foreign minister based International Crisis Group from 2000 Ukraine, and now again the Middle East, cism - considering the eye-watering estim-

2024 (November 2023).

Rising tide. for our Pacific island years. PHOTO: GETTY