Foreword

The 50th anniversary conference of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (SDSC), from which the essays in this volume are drawn, drew its inspiration from a similar event that Professors Robert O’Neill and David Horner hosted at The Australian National University in July 1980 under the theme ‘New Directions in Strategic Thinking’.

There are some striking parallels between the period in which O’Neill and Horner held that conference—at the onset of the so-called second Cold War—and the world in which we find ourselves today. As Hedley Bull noted in his remarks to that earlier gathering:

In the late 1960s and the first few years of the 1970s, it was widely held in the Western world that the role of force in international relations had gone into decline … A school of writers about international politics began to argue that the strategic factor in international power relationships was giving place to an economic factor … Today, rightly or wrongly, [those ideas] are in large part rejected. In the Western world there is now a widespread expectation that the role of force will not diminish but increase—an expectation that is borne out by the evidence of mounting arms and arms expenditures in the Soviet bloc, the Third World and the West itself.¹

Fifty years after SDSC’s founding, geopolitics is making a comeback. The January 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, for instance, boldly asserts that ‘interstate strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security’.² Talk of an

emergent Asian arms race, spurred by North Korea’s burgeoning nuclear and missile capabilities, is becoming increasingly prevalent, and respected commentators regard the chances of war breaking out on the Korean Peninsula as being as high as 50 per cent.

Scholars and practitioners alike, such as Harvard Professor Graham Allison and Chinese President Xi Jinping, have cautioned repeatedly on the dangers of China and the United States falling into a ‘Thucydides trap’ in a historical allusion to the strategic competition between Athens and Sparta 2,500 years ago, which tragically brought to an end a golden age in ancient Greece. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who is equally fond of this historical analogy, has warned against taking the so-called Asian peace of recent decades for granted. As Turnbull observed in his keynote address to the June 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, ‘the gathering clouds of uncertainty and instability are signals for all of us to play more active roles in protecting and shaping the future of this region’.

The need for high-quality strategic thinking is becoming increasingly urgent and apparent in the emerging landscape of international politics. Yet the world at large, and the Asia-Pacific region where much of this new era in strategic competition will be played out, is unfortunately starting from a lower-than-optimal base.

That is because the fate of strategic studies is intimately and inevitably tied to its international political and security milieu. For instance, the first two decades following its birth as a formal field of study in the late 1940s have been characterised as a ‘golden age’ of strategic studies. The primary focus of scholars during this period was with a set of dilemmas associated with the onset of the nuclear era, including how use of these devastating new weapons could be avoided, or at least controlled and limited should war involving their use ever break out.

In the radical political milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, strategic studies quickly fell out of fashion. The emergence of a strong anti-war sentiment in the United States rendered the study of such issues unfashionable and even distasteful. The so-called oil shocks of the 1970s shifted international focus more towards the potential use of economic

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weapons and saw greater emphasis given to the economic dimensions of security. A period of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union, coupled with the normalisation of US–China relations, rendered the prospects for interstate conflict even more remote.

As Bull’s remarks to the July 1980 SDSC conference suggest, the renewal of US–Soviet tensions in the 1980s challenged these assumptions for a time. Within a decade, however, the Cold War was over, and by the early 1990s the Soviet Union had evaporated. A swathe of articles appeared that questioned whether strategic studies should even survive in an era that the prominent international relations scholar Francis Fukuyama famously characterised as marking the ‘end of history’.

Fifty years following SDSC’s founding, the question of whether strategic studies has any future is increasingly being answered resoundingly in the affirmative. Indeed, a strong case can be made that a new ‘golden age’ in the history of strategic studies is upon us. This is not only reflected in the significant expansion of the Centre that has occurred over the past half decade or so. It is also evident in the fact that new strategic studies programs are beginning to emerge throughout an Asia-Pacific region that in many respects has traditionally displayed an aversion towards studying use of force issues in any formal sense.

Some might see this more crowded landscape as posing a threat to the future of SDSC. Instead, it should be regarded as presenting an enormous opportunity. Some SDSC scholars, such as the late Desmond Ball, played an important advisory role in the establishment of Singapore’s Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS). IDSS is now, of course, part of the world-leading S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and continues to enjoy a close and productive relationship with the Centre. To be sure, as Amitav Acharya observes in his contribution to this volume, the provision of similar intellectual leadership, particularly regionally, during this next ‘golden age’ will need to be undertaken with a considerable degree of sensitivity. That said, it is an aspiration that SDSC should not shy away from. The excellent set of essays in this volume provide an impressive foundation from which to begin.

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