

Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

July 2026 Issue

DEAKIN CENTRE FOR
**FUTURE DEFENCE
& NATIONAL SECURITY**



Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

Introduction

Welcome to the fourth issue of Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence! Signal is a monthly publication by the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security. We publish short articles focused on contemporary strategic and security issues, as well as important debates in fields relevant to understanding our strategic environment and defence strategy. Our initial editions have drawn on the depth of expertise present in our Centre, but as we continue we also aim to draw on external expertise and insight where possible. If you are interested in writing for Signal please get in touch!

In this July issue we are featuring our first external expert, Dr Michael Bosack, writing on North Korea's security relationships and how we should assess them. Michael Clarke then examines China's recent Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) test, and argues that we should see it primarily as a means for China to build a more 'survivable and operationally credible nuclear deterrent'. Finally, Michael Hatherell reviews Jack Watling's recent book *Statecraft: The New Rules of Power in a Divided World*.

Contents - July Issue

Beyond the 'Axis': How to Assess North Korea's Security Relationships

Michael MacArthur Bosack

Pages 1-5

China's SLBM Test: Missing the Trees for the Leaves?

Michael Clarke

Pages 6-10

From the Book Shelf - Jack Watling, 'Statecraft: The New Rules of Power in a Divided World' (Macmillan, 2026)

Michael Hatherell

Pages 11-12

About Signal

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Beyond the 'Axis': How to Assess North Korea's Security Relationships

Michael MacArthur Bosack

How should analysts assess the depth and quality of North Korea's security relationships?

On paper, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s military partnerships appear to be deepening. After all, in July, the senior-most levels of government from [China](#) and [North Korea](#) commemorated the sixty-fifth anniversary of their alliance treaty, and there is [speculation that Kim Jong Un is now preparing for another summit](#) with Vladimir Putin in Russia. Some observers have even suggested that a new axis is forming that includes Iran—[colloquially referred to as “CRINK.”](#)

However, surface-level assessments can belie the DPRK's cautious and transactional approach to military relationships, often assuming far stronger ties than may actually exist in practice. This can lead to an overestimation of allied capabilities and unfounded assumptions about how North Korea may act in response to different threat scenarios. But it is also easy to miss clues that signal important connections and cooperation.

To understand the DPRK's military partnerships, it is necessary to analyse them through six observable components. In doing so, scholars and practitioners can see them for what they really are, not how Pyongyang, Beijing, or Moscow may be touting them to be.

The Six Components of Security Relationships

There are many [different types and levels of security relationships](#) ranging from partnerships to alignments to alliances. While there is scholarly utility in assessing these discrete categories, practical analysis should instead ask which components of a security relationship are present and how developed they are. There are six such components to evaluate.

The first is common interests; that is, the strategic objectives that motivate security cooperation. These interests can be broad in scale, such as a mutual threat or a desire to change the security status quo. Conversely, they may be narrow in focus, targeting a mutual area of concern such as counter-terrorism or anti-piracy.

The second component is unilateral policies. These policies are those that one state establishes to foster security engagement with another and can include delivery of security assistance, inclusion of desired partners in strategic documents, and invitations to security conferences, among others.

Third is routine security engagement. This is any military-related activity that happens with some level of regularity. The term “routine” is important because security relationships are not built on one-off engagements. The security activities that create effective partnerships happen consistently, whether formally or informally, and include exercises, policy dialogues, and real-world military or policing operations.



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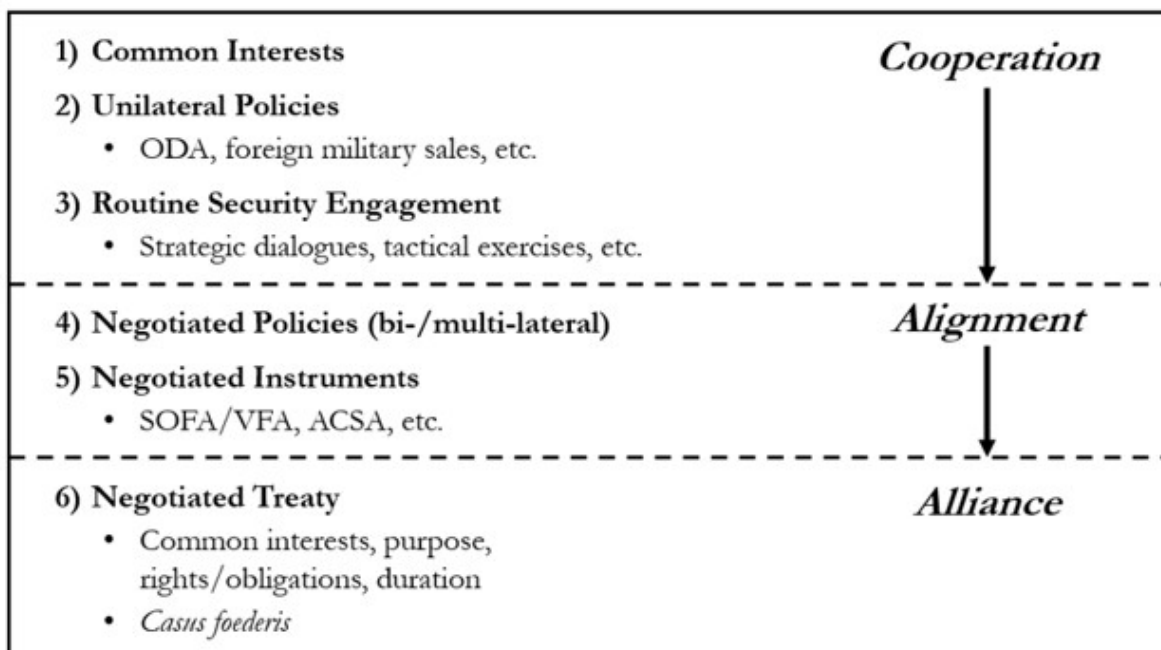
Fourth is negotiated policies. This is when decisions are made with another state's security interests deliberately incorporated into policy designs. Here, the states themselves communicate these interests through direct negotiations or consultations, articulating them in things like publicised joint statements.

The fifth component is negotiated instruments. These are international agreements, memoranda, operational plans, and other documents the parties produce that formalise policies, institutions, interests, and activities. Examples include General Security of Military Information Agreements and Reciprocal Access Agreements.

The sixth is negotiated alliance treaties. Alliance treaties represent the highest institutionalised form of instrument for security relationships. The key distinguishing factor is a specific obligation for use of military force when a certain threshold (the *casus foederis*) is met.

While an alliance treaty is important, it has limited practical value without the other five components which make the security relationship operative. Conversely, states who do not maintain an alliance treaty can still be highly effective security partners because of the depth and breadth of the other five components.

With these in mind, one can examine the DPRK's security relationships more effectively.



The six components (chart by the author)

Scene Setter: from Latency to Reset

While the Kim family's military ties to [Beijing](#) and [Moscow](#) predate even North Korea's own statehood, the security relationships between the DPRK and its neighbours have ebbed and flowed since the country's foundation in 1948. By the late 2010s, the DPRK's military relationships with China and Russia were largely dormant. Vladimir Putin had downgraded the Russo-DPRK alliance treaty to a "[Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation](#)" in 2000. China functioned primarily as the DPRK's [economic lifeline](#) and [source of technology](#) rather than an active security partner. Relations degraded further between 2006 and 2017 when Beijing and Moscow supported UN Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. While the period of diplomacy in 2018-19 sparked political level engagement, military-to-military cooperation remained off the table.

Then, [COVID compelled a nationwide lockdown](#) in North Korea. With minimal contact and deliberate focus on internal policies, the Kim Jong Un regime had an opportunity to re-evaluate its foreign partnerships.

The DPRK remained on COVID lockdown from January 2020 until September 2023 when the government fully relaxed its draconian protocols. It was not coincidental that the DPRK's reopening coincided with Kim Jong Un's eight-day [visit to Russia](#). This set the stage for the evolving security ties that the world is now observing.

Breaking Down the DPRK's Security Relationships with Russia and China

Prior to the COVID lockdown, the Kim Jong Un regime maintained a cautious approach towards the Kremlin. Kim Jong Un [met with](#) Xi Jinping four times, former South Korean President Moon Jae-in three times, and Donald Trump twice before he met Vladimir Putin. But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed the power dynamics in the relationship: now, the Kim regime had leverage because North Korea had [much-needed munitions and personnel available to deliver](#) to support the Russian war effort.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang and Beijing had [consistently touted their ties "forged in blood,"](#) but it would take two years before the DPRK started picking things back up following the COVID reset. Since mid-2025, the two countries [have taken steps](#) to revitalise diplomatic and economic cooperation, marked most significantly by [Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang](#) this past June. While it may appear that the two countries are ripe for revamping their alliance, that is neither a foregone conclusion nor something that either side even wants at this time.

The nature of the alliance treaties underpinning the two relationships now differ markedly. The DPRK remains China's sole treaty ally, underpinned by the Sino-DPRK ["Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance"](#) that has been in place since 1961. The treaty provides a mutual defence clause and has remained in effect since its signing. Notably, neither party has ever exercised treaty defence commitments.



On the Russia side, the two countries revitalised their alliance agreement during Putin's most recent trip to Pyongyang in June 2024 when they concluded a the ["Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."](#) This established a new legal framework for the two countries' bilateral relationship and included a specific obligation to provide "immediate military and other assistance by all means available" in the event of an armed attack. They subsequently operationalised it with the DPRK's support to the Russian campaign to [recapture the Ukrainian-occupied Kursk region](#), and both governments have publicly portrayed the deployment as an early success of the new treaty.

Beyond formal alliances, the depth of common interests is less straightforward. The transactional benefits of the Russo-DPRK war are evident, and it is clear that there are overlapping interests from the Kremlin and Pyongyang. What is less clear is the depth of their common interests beyond this specific war. If their shared goal is countering the system of global sanctions and pressure, that will be enough to keep them moving in a unified direction for a time.

However, there is a key divergence between them: autonomy and dependence. As soon as the Russia-Ukraine War ends, the power dynamics change. It will be important to observe how the DPRK will respond to the end of hostilities and decreased Russian reliance upon North Korean assistance because it will invariably have an impact. In the meantime, one cannot rule out the timing of the DPRK's renewed outreach to China with the prospects of the Russia-Ukraine War entering its endgame.

On the Sino-DPRK side, neither party has advertised new impetus for renewed engagement beyond the standard talking points. [Criticisms](#) of U.S. hegemonic ambitions, a destabilised international environment, and common background as anti-imperial powers have been the leading narratives in statements from the two governments, which does little to indicate whether there is a new baseline for common interests beyond "anti-U.S." positions.

Routine security engagement also reveals a stark contrast. Right now, routine Russo-DPRK activities are principally focused on North Korean support to Russia's war effort against Ukraine. This includes munitions and other war materiel delivery, as well as troop deployments which have recently gained new attention with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's statement that the Kremlin has [requested an additional deployment of 30,000 North Korean troops](#). As part of this wartime engagement, there have been [increased exchanges in weapons technology](#), and these shared weapon systems and know-how increase the likelihood of future security assistance while also giving a foundation for continued cooperation and exchanges.

On the Sino-DPRK side, there is little to no routine security engagement. Even in the recent alliance anniversary commemoration, the DPRK [did not send military leaders to Beijing](#); rather, it was trade and commerce officials who filled the travel party. This reflects the persistent distance in the military-to-military relationship. Neither side has specifically addressed why this gap has endured, but it is likely reflective of Pyongyang's desire to preserve its security autonomy as a counterbalance to the economic dependence it already has on Beijing. This is not to say that routine military engagement will not emerge in the future, but there is little evidence to suggest that such cooperation is planned between the two countries at this time.

The extent of negotiated policies is similarly uneven. Given the breadth of cooperation in support of Russia's war against Ukraine, there have clearly been negotiated policies related to security cooperation. However, since Moscow and Pyongyang have avoided any joint or even coordinated statements clarifying the trajectory of their security relationship, it is unclear how much influence either side has on the other's individual policy designs.



Importantly, there has been no suggestion from any of the parties that there should be integration beyond bilateral arrangements. In other words, neither Pyongyang, Beijing, nor Moscow have suggested that tri- or multi-lateral cooperation is either in the works or in their respective interests.

The same is true for the DPRK and China, which have only made brief mention of intent vis-à-vis security engagement in state readouts from bilateral meetings. In the most recent summit meeting between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, the Chinese government [highlighted that the two sides should “enhance exchanges” in military affairs](#), but the DPRK side did not include such language in its readout. In subsequent meetings between working level officials, there have been no clear statements regarding what any ‘enhanced exchanges in military affairs’ might be.

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Finally, the limited evidence of negotiated security instruments further illustrates the uncertainty surrounding both relationships. There have not been any specific security-related agreements between the DPRK and either China or Russia advertised. This may indicate that either the partners are operating on ad hoc arrangements or there are classified agreements that are not being revealed.

Way Ahead for the Relationships

This breakdown highlights a few key points. First, the Russo-DPRK security relationship is getting stronger by virtue of circumstance, but it is unclear how the two parties will adjust when the Russia-Ukraine War ends. As the Kremlin's wartime dependencies on Pyongyang decrease, it is possible that the DPRK navigates the shifting power dynamics by diversifying its security relationship portfolio. This would widen the aperture for bilateral Sino-DPRK military cooperation, but it is also relevant in the realm of arms sales and other security assistance, where potential partners in Southeast Asia and South America may await.

As the Kremlin's wartime dependencies on Pyongyang decrease, it is possible that the DPRK navigates the shifting power dynamics by diversifying its security relationship portfolio. This would widen the aperture for bilateral Sino-DPRK military cooperation, but it is also relevant in the realm of arms sales and other security assistance, where potential partners in Southeast Asia and South America may await.

Second, the Sino-DPRK security relationship was moribund, but the recent Xi-Kim summit rekindled bilateral engagement. Now the two governments are working to set cooperation back on track, but there is little evidence to indicate what cooperation may take place in the security domain. There are still many steps the two governments are likely to take in the political and economic realms first as they work towards consistent cooperation after the COVID reset.

Third, the idea that there is a multilateral partnership forming is without evidence beyond the three leaders' shared appearance at Beijing's victory day parade in September 2025. Pyongyang has traditionally preferred to manage the relationships with its much larger partners independently, and there are no indicators that point to a different approach now.

None of this is to suggest that Pyongyang's caution will not subside and the relationships cannot grow deeper. Perhaps the cooperation that emerged after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine will survive once hostilities have ceased and the Kremlin has replenished its military stores. Maybe Beijing and Pyongyang will get around to pursuing security initiatives once they have sufficiently rekindled political and economic engagement.

This progress will not be readily apparent. As the three parties have demonstrated, government statements will only offer sparse indicators related to military initiatives—analysts will instead need to infer these developments from observable patterns of behaviour. It will be important to monitor concrete activities between the partners going forward, especially as they pertain to the six components of security relationships. The fundamental questions to ask: do the indicators point to relationships that are temporary and transactional or enduring and transformational; and will there be any deliberate efforts to link bilateral engagements to multilateral ones?



Ultimately, misreading security relationships carries real policy consequences. Assuming Russia, China and North Korea operate as a unified bloc risks exaggerating coordination and encouraging responses to threats that do not yet exist. Conversely, underestimating emerging operational cooperation—particularly between Moscow and Pyongyang—could leave policymakers unprepared for genuine shifts in regional security.

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China's SLBM Test: Missing the Trees for the Leaves?

Michael Clarke

According to state media China [conducted](#) “a flight test of its nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM, from a nuclear-powered strategic submarine” on 6 July, marking “the farthest such trial of any Chinese naval missile to date”. Although the missile type was not specified by Beijing, it would appear to have been either the [JL-2](#) or [JL-3](#) – China’s second and third generation SLBMs with ranges of approximately 8,000km and 10,000km respectively. Both variants are nuclear capable and multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capable.

It is [believed](#) that the missile was launched by one of the PLAN’s Type 094 Jin-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) from the South China Sea, overflying the Philippines and travelling some 7,300km before landing in the South Pacific in waters between Nauru and Tonga. The test – which constitutes China’s first near-full length flight test of an SLBM – drew significant [criticism](#) from many Pacific Island states and was characterised by the [Australian](#) and [New Zealand](#) governments as “destabilising”.

Some Australian commentators have [asserted](#) that the test, coming hours after Australia and Fiji [announced](#) the conclusion of the “Ocean of Peace Alliance”, was in [fact](#) “no coincidence” and “a clear warning by Beijing of its intent to challenge any effort by Australia to strengthen regional ties”. The claim that the test was directly aimed at Australia is not especially plausible given the fact that such [tests](#) are planned and scheduled well in advance given the scale and complexity involved.

The SLBM test should be understood not as a signal directed primarily at Australia, but as evidence of China's broader effort to build a more survivable and operationally credible nuclear deterrent. Viewed alongside the expansion of missile silos and China’s September 2024 Pacific ICBM test, it suggests that Beijing is moving beyond its traditional model of minimum deterrence towards a more resilient assured retaliation posture.

The successful test of an SLBM – of either the JL-2 or JL-3 variant – is a further step on China’s path toward ensuring a secure-second strike capability by demonstrating the credibility, readiness, and operational competence of the sea-based leg of its nuclear triad. As such it complements the documented expansion of China’s land-based leg of its nuclear triad since 2021 (and the transition of that leg of the triad to a silo-based missile force). The significance of the test meanwhile lies in the signal that this demonstration of a credible sea-based leg sends to the United States and what this might imply for future Sino-US conflict scenarios.

China’s Nuclear Arsenal Expansion

Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Richard Marles has stated that the “fundamental issue” with the test was that not only was it indicative of a “very dramatic military buildup” by China but that it has done so without “an explanation as to why they are building the capabilities that they are”.



The SLBM test should be understood not as a signal directed primarily at Australia, but as evidence of China's broader effort to build a more survivable and operationally credible nuclear deterrent.

Yet the SLBM test is very much consistent with the nuclear force modernisation and expansion China has embarked upon since 2021. Since the [revelation](#) of the construction of new missile silo fields near the city of Hami in Xinjiang in July 2021, it has been clear that China is embarking upon a significant and rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal.

Between [2020](#) and [2025](#), estimates of China's nuclear stockpile increased from roughly 350 to around 600 warheads, accompanied by substantial growth across both its land- and sea-based delivery systems. This rapid expansion demonstrates that Beijing is no longer merely modernising existing forces but building a larger and more diversified nuclear deterrent.

This expansion has been driven by [internal](#) and [external](#) forms of political and bureaucratic competition, as well as considerations of prestige.

Domestically, the [reorganisation](#) of the PLA in 2015 and the elevation of the 2nd Artillery Corps (which had been responsible for China's conventional and nuclear missile forces since 1964) into a stand-alone service arm as the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), [signalled](#) the increased significance attached to China's nuclear forces under Xi Jinping's leadership and "a more concerted effort to integrate PLARF capabilities into more effective PLA-wide joint operations" in pursuit of "strategic deterrence". Externally, meanwhile, Xi Jinping has since 2017 consistently framed the [possession](#) of a credible nuclear arsenal as both a key milestone for the PLA to meet on its path to becoming a "[world-class military](#)" and as a marker of its attainment of great power status.



China's nuclear triad has historically been heavily reliant on its land-based ballistic missile forces, particularly road-mobile systems. This has posed a [survivability](#) problem for China particularly vis-à-vis the United States' well-developed nuclear triad. Indeed, China's [2025](#) White Paper on "Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era" implicitly recognised this by noting that a "certain country" (i.e. the United States) through its "massive nuclear weapons stockpile", reinforcement of its "nuclear deterrence and war-fighting capabilities", exercise of "extended deterrence" and "forward-deployed intermediate range missiles" is "severely undermining" the security of the Indo-Pacific.

Silos, Missile Tests, and Survivability

Since the early 2020s, three developments stand out: rapid missile silo construction, increasingly realistic strategic missile testing, and deployment of new road-mobile missiles. Together these developments point to a deliberate effort to improve the survivability of China's nuclear deterrent by [creating](#) a diverse and distributed force capable of surviving a first strike.

China's construction of new missile silo fields, for example, serves several complementary strategic objectives here.

First, it serves to strengthen the survivability of China's nuclear deterrent by increasing the number of hardened targets an adversary must destroy in a first strike, thereby reinforcing its assured second-strike capability. Second, the expansion may contribute to offsetting the perceived challenge posed by US missile defence systems as a larger number of launchers and warheads increases the likelihood that sufficient missiles could penetrate missile defences and deliver an effective retaliatory strike.

Third, silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles can maintain higher levels of operational readiness than many road-mobile systems, allowing faster launch and enhancing the credibility of China's deterrent. Fourth, an extensive silo network creates strategic uncertainty through a potential "[shell game](#)," whereby only some silos contain operational missiles, forcing an adversary to target every silo or risk leaving survivable missiles capable of retaliation, increasing the cost of a counterforce attack.

The push for survivability has also been evident in recent Chinese missile testing.

In September 2024 China conducted its first test of an ICBM since 1980 when it test-fired the [DF-31AG](#) ICBM, China's first solid-fuelled, road-mobile ICBM. [Launched](#) from Hainan Island by the PLARF, the missile travelled approximately 11,500km before the re-entry vehicle landed in waters near French Polynesia. The near-full length test, [according](#) to state media, was "intended to examine the weapon's capability and performance" and to "check" the "operational readiness" of the PLARF. More significantly, solid-fuelled and road-mobile ICBMs are [considered](#) to enhance [survivability](#) and operational readiness compared to liquid-fuelled missiles as they require less logistical support as they are fuelled from manufacture, can be stored for long periods, and can be readily repositioned to limit risk of detection.

The recent SLBM test represents another step in China's effort to improve the survivability of its nuclear deterrent. When considered in parallel with the [ramped-up](#) construction of nuclear-powered submarines evident at China's Bohai shipyard since 2021, this suggests a concerted effort to address [long-standing](#) concerns about the [relative](#) weakness of China's sea-based capability and its over-reliance on the land-based leg of the triad.

Whereas missile silos strengthen the resilience of the land-based force, an operational SSBN capability provides an additional second-strike option that is substantially more difficult for an adversary to neutralise. The test therefore demonstrated not simply missile performance but the growing credibility of China's sea-based deterrent.



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Shifting Strategy, Shifting Signals?

If missile silo construction, ICBM testing and SLBM testing all point towards improving force survivability, the remaining question is what they imply about China's broader nuclear strategy?

Historically, China had pursued a strategy of "minimum deterrence" characterised by reliance on threatening the lowest level of damage for assured retaliation with the fewest nuclear weapons possible. This reflected the fact that China [tended](#) to believe that nuclear deterrence was "relatively insensitive to changes in the size, configuration, and readiness of nuclear forces", resulting in a nuclear strategy that sacrificed offensive capability "in exchange for maximizing political control and minimizing economic costs". As a result, its nuclear arsenal remained relatively small and in a state of low operational readiness, its development of the legs of its triad incremental, and its nuclear [targeting](#) characterised by a counter-value (i.e. cities/civilian targets) rather than counter-force (i.e. military-industrial targets) posture.

The shifts that have been evident since 2021 however suggest that "minimum deterrence" no longer holds as an accurate description of China's nuclear strategy. The question that remains to be answered here is: what kind of strategy does the emerging scale and quality of China's nuclear arsenal support?

Minimum deterrence assumed that a relatively small and low-readiness force was sufficient to guarantee retaliation. China's recent investments in hundreds of missile silos, expanded SSBN construction and increasingly realistic strategic missile tests are difficult to reconcile with that model. Instead, they point towards a more resilient assured retaliation posture characterised by greater survivability, higher readiness and increased strategic flexibility. Although scholars continue to [debate](#) the [precise](#) label for this evolving posture, the evidence increasingly favours this interpretation.

On balance, the major trends within China's nuclear force expansion and development reviewed here suggest a transition to a more ambitious nuclear posture. The missile silo expansion, for example, appears inconsistent with the requirements of a "minimum deterrence" strategy. The scale of missile silo construction – an [estimated](#) 320 new silos for solid-fuelled ICBMs across three fields at Yumen, Hami, and Yulin – at a minimum suggests a push for a larger, survivable assured retaliation force on higher operational readiness.



The expansion of the silo fields may also serve an important signalling [function](#) in the context of the Sino-US nuclear relationship. Here, the development of a large and visible ICBM force supports China's image as a peer nuclear power with the US, supports its claim to great power status, and [may](#) – through increasing Beijing's confidence in its deterrent's survivability – strengthen its bargaining power in future arms control negotiations.

Chinese strategists may also [believe](#) that a larger, more survivable force reduces incentives for pre-emption since if neither side believes it can disarm the other successfully, both are more likely to rely on deterrence rather than striking first. However, as some Western analysts [argue](#), the opposite could in fact be true – i.e. that higher readiness, more silos, and larger arsenals could increase arms racing and crisis instability.

A major feature of both the 2024 ICBM test and the July 2026 SLBM test, meanwhile, was that they were arguably not merely developmental tests but demonstrations of capability and operational capacity as they required the exercise of command and control over strategic forces and displayed a willingness to demonstrate strategic capability publicly.

Conclusion

Taken together, the rapid expansion of China's missile silo fields, the 2024 Pacific ICBM test, and the 2026 Pacific SLBM test point to a broader strategic evolution rather than a series of isolated developments. Viewed collectively, these developments indicate that Beijing is seeking to construct a more survivable, credible and operationally ready nuclear force capable of guaranteeing retaliation under increasingly contested strategic conditions. Rather than signalling an intention to match the United States weapon-for-weapon, China's nuclear modernisation appears directed towards ensuring that no adversary can confidently eliminate its deterrent through a first strike.

The significance of the July 2026 SLBM test therefore lies less in its immediate regional political symbolism than in what it demonstrates about the maturation of China's nuclear triad. Together with the expansion of silo-based ICBMs and earlier long-range missile testing, it suggests that China is integrating its land- and sea-based strategic forces into a more robust and diversified deterrent capable of operating across multiple domains. These developments reinforce Beijing's confidence in the survivability of its nuclear forces while simultaneously signalling to Washington that China increasingly possesses the capability to sustain a credible second-strike under conditions of major-power conflict.

While the question of whether this trajectory contributes to greater strategic stability or heightened competition remains an open one, it is apparent that describing China's nuclear strategy as one of "minimum deterrence" no longer holds.

For Australian policymakers and analysts, the principal significance of the July 2026 SLBM test lies not in any immediate political message to Australia or the Pacific Islands, but in what it reveals about China's changing nuclear posture. When viewed alongside missile silo construction and recent ICBM testing, it forms part of a coherent effort to build a more survivable and operationally credible nuclear deterrent. Analysts who focus primarily on the symbolism of individual missile tests risk overlooking the much more consequential transformation taking place in China's strategic forces.

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From the Book Shelf - Jack Watling, 'Statecraft: The New Rules of Power in a Divided World' (Macmillan, 2026)

Michael Hatherell

Given the shifts in global politics seen in the last decade there is a growing demand for analysis of how states can make sense of their strategic environment and respond effectively. In this context Jack Watling's latest book, ['Statecraft: The New Rules of Power in a Divided World'](#) seeks to present lessons about power while drawing on observations from recent conflicts and broader strategic competition.

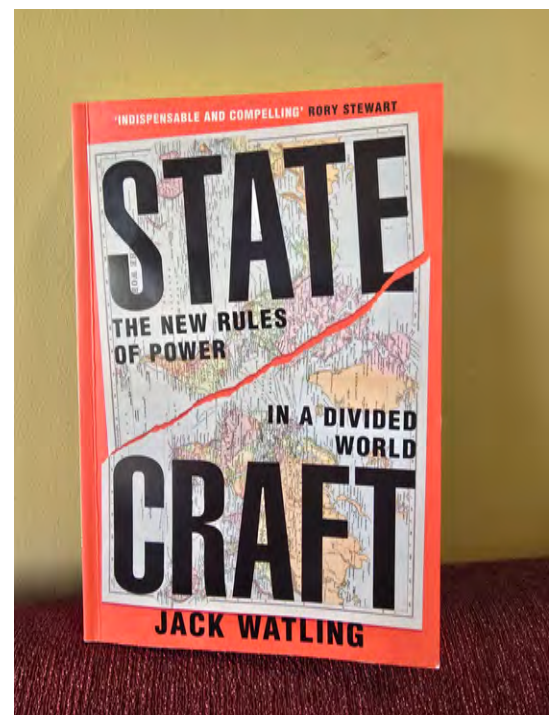
Watling's experiences as a journalist, research fellow and government and military adviser are central to the book. His experiences in Ukraine and analysis of the Ukraine war provide the most vivid and consistent set of examples, but are complemented with cases from other parts of the world, including Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Taiwan, Israel and Palestine. Each chapter begins with an anecdote based on Watling's engagement with different individuals related to these cases, and then draws on these experiences to present its main arguments.

Watling's overall goal is to demonstrate 'how states compete in a dynamic contemporary environment. It is about how they exert leverage and influence, how they can plan and manage contingencies, when they may or may not be the most powerful actor, but do not hold a majority of the power within the environment' (p.9). While the audience for this sort of analysis is clearly broad, Watling pitches his work as an attempt to support 'NATO members to achieve better strategic outcomes through their statecraft' (p. 9).

The book offers a series of thoughtful reflections on statecraft today. Each of the 12 chapters in the body of *Statecraft* operates as a separate analysis focused on a specific theme, such as 'Dependence', 'Chokepoints', 'Systems', 'Time', and 'Scale'. While chapters draw on some of the same case study background, there is relatively little direct connection between these individual reflections. This works as long as the reader is comfortable engaging with each chapter on its own merits and drawing some of their own thematic connection between chapter content.

There are some standout chapters. 'Chokepoints' begins with a compelling analysis of the Ukraine War and the ability of both Russia and Ukraine to deny the sea to one another. The analysis in the rest of the chapter turns to the Strait of Hormuz and other strategic waterways, and it is notable how applicable this analysis is to the 2026 Iran War and the subsequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz despite the book being written prior to these events.

Equally compelling is the analysis in multiple chapters of the challenges of the more human aspects of statecraft. The impact of flaws in human perception in the chapter 'Insight' and the importance of domestic politics in 'Lenses' are some of the more successful parts of *Statecraft*. There is also a very grounded discussion of the place of 'aspirations, values and personal relationships' in the chapter 'Values'. The examples used in this chapter from Mali, Iraq and Palestine were some of the most revealing in the book.



There are some notable absences from the book. One is a more direct engagement with the question seemingly set up by the title. While Watling could be said to be mapping rules of power in today's world, it is not clear to what extent these are truly 'new' rules of power. In the way Watling's reflections are shared, it reads more as a reminder of rules of power that have always been there - even if there may be more of a demand to 'rediscover' them given the sense of change in global politics. Because each chapter works as a reflection on a specific theme, there is not much direct engagement with the question of how we should think more holistically about power today.

More significantly, *Statecraft* lacks sustained engagement with geoeconomics. This is understandable given Watling is a leading expert on modern wars, but given the premise of examining the 'new rules of power' one might expect to see a deeper focus on how geoeconomics is shaping power today. There are some exceptions - Watling examines some economic aspects of the relationship between China and Taiwan, and economic and fuel security factors are an element in his analysis of 'chokepoints'. But the book lacks a deeper engagement with economics that might have helped to flesh out the central role played by economic power today. In the final substantive chapter 'Collaboration', *Statecraft* deals with some shared challenges like climate change. This chapter is a worthy addition but stands to some extent apart from the rest of the content of the book.

Statecraft also includes some elements of a critique of Western strategy. This critique is not consistently sustained through the book, though many of the reflections do have something to say for how strategy should be done differently. In the conclusion, Watling connects this critique back to the supposed Western need for 'a story arc' in their strategy, noting that:

following the end of the Cold War, strategy has become an endless process of writing long, narrative policy documents describing a series of future aspirations and, in varying levels of detail, how we might get there. The assumption of these strategies is continuity rather than change, with periodic crises arising that threaten the stability of the environment. The answer is 'crisis response', which is in essence the implementation of countermeasures to endeavour to return to the status quo ante. Reality, as we have seen over the course of this book, is unkind to this approach of strategy by narrative. (p. 299)

While this critique is not directly connected back to the structure of the book, there are logical connections. As noted earlier, readers who are looking for a sustained argument across the structure of the book, either about the nature of power in today's world or the problems of Western strategy, are likely to be somewhat disappointed. However if the chapters are treated as individual reflections on the messy reality of strategy in a world where competition and conflict do not follow simple story arcs, then *Statecraft* has a lot to offer to contemporary strategic thinkers.

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