

Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

May 2026 Issue

DEAKIN CENTRE FOR
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Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

Introduction

Welcome to the second issue of Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence! Signal is a monthly publication by the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security.

In this issue we continue to explore contemporary strategic and geopolitical matters including the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal, the place of a more limited concept of the 'Rules-Based Global Order' in Australian defence and government policy, and continued questions regarding the war in Iran. We are thankful to our featured authors this month and look forward to the upcoming pieces in our June issue!

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About Signal

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Enquiries should be directed to michael.clarke@deakin.edu.au.

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'Strategic Stability': An Underappreciated Influence on China's Nuclear Arsenal Expansion?

Michael Clarke

One of the core trends that is widely seen as shaping the contemporary strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific is China's ongoing [military modernisation](#). A particular source of tension - and for [some](#) observers a clear signal of China's less than benign intent - is the rapid [expansion](#) of its nuclear arsenal.

When coupled with Beijing's [consistent refusal](#) to engage in arms control, threat reduction or nuclear disarmament talks with the United States (and Russia), it is easy to conceive of China's military and nuclear modernization as a direct challenge to the notion of 'strategic stability' in U.S.-China relations.

This is especially the case if one adopts the predominant understanding of 'strategic stability' operationalised by the United States (and the West more broadly) during the Cold War. The essence of 'strategic stability', as Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin [noted](#) in an influential description at the height of the Cold War, is to limit incentives for states to launch a first strike by ensuring secure second-strike capabilities.

'Strategic stability' from the American [perspective](#) during the Cold War thus often [entailed](#) a narrow focus on operational and technical dimensions of the US-Soviet nuclear arms race - e.g. metrics of warhead numbers or assessment of technological advances of missile delivery systems - in order to assess whether any side might perceive clear military incentives for first-use of nuclear weapons.

Critiques of China's evolving position tend to be refracted through this understanding of 'strategic stability'. But does Beijing in fact understand the 'essence' of 'strategic stability' in the same way?

This is a crucial question to answer. Indeed, as Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane [remind](#) us, the behaviour and actions of 'rational' actors are not simply determined by assessments of material reality but are fundamentally shaped by the 'substantive quality of available ideas' and as such 'ideas help clarify principles and conceptions of causal relationship' and 'coordinate individual action'.

David Logan [contends](#) in a study of the 'available ideas' that underpin Chinese thinking about 'strategic stability' that China conceives of this concept in a way distinct from that which predominates in the United States.

Like the United States, Chinese thinking emphasises the importance of mutual nuclear vulnerability through secure second-strike capabilities as a key component of 'strategic stability'. However, this is but one of several conditions seen as necessary for 'strategic stability' in Chinese thinking. In addition to mutual nuclear vulnerability, Chinese thinking conceives of 'strategic stability' as being [determined](#) by the 'overall state of the of U.S.-China bilateral relationship', and a belief in the non-controllability of nuclear escalation.



Critiques of China's evolving position tend to be refracted through this understanding of 'strategic stability'. But does Beijing in fact understand the 'essence' of 'strategic stability' in the same way?

This more expansive conception of 'strategic stability' helps explain, in part, some of the current dynamics in China's nuclear expansion.

In the first instance, China's commitment to a 'no first use' (NFU) doctrine – most recently [reaffirmed](#) in China's November 2025 white paper, 'China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era' - and its evident expansion of its nuclear arsenal, is not contradictory from Beijing's perspective and contributes to the attainment of 'strategic stability'. Beijing's commitment to a NFU posture and its encouragement to other nuclear weapons states to follow suit is driven by the objective to have nuclear peers (most notably the United States) acknowledge and commit to mutual nuclear vulnerability.

Nuclear arsenal modernisation and expansion, in turn, are also tied to this broad objective. China has long perceived that it has a force [survivability](#) problem vis-à-vis the United States given the imbalance of China's nuclear triad which has been heavily skewed to reliance on land-based nuclear forces. Such is that imbalance that some [observers](#) have suggested that China has a nuclear triad 'in name only'. This problem, as China's [2025](#) white paper put it, has been exacerbated by the fact a 'certain country' (i.e. the United States) 'keeps adjusting its nuclear policies, stubbornly maintaining a massive nuclear weapons stockpile while further reinforcing its nuclear deterrence and war-fighting capabilities'.



China's nuclear modernisation and expansion, then, is designed to attain an adequate second-strike capability by [developing](#) a 'diverse and distributed nuclear force structure that can survive an enemy attack'. As such it should not be surprising that China has focused on further developing the sea-based leg of the nuclear triad (although the PLA Navy's undersea warfare capabilities [remain](#) based on large SSN and SSK fleets) together with its air-based nuclear forces such as its [H-6 bomber](#) and the development of the nuclear-capable [H-20](#) stealth bomber.

Yet China appears not to be aiming at something approaching relative parity with the United States. Rather, Chinese strategists appear to believe that strategic stability can be [achieved](#) 'so long as each side maintains a survivable second strike that can credibly threaten nuclear retaliation and does not attempt to undermine the retaliatory capability of the other'. Under this notion of 'asymmetric strategic stability' China would have lower thresholds for survivability and retaliatory damage than that envisioned, for instance, by the [United States](#) in its Cold War arms race with the Soviet Union.

China's assessment of the overall trend of U.S.-China relations has also undoubtedly played a role in shaping the direction of nuclear expansion.

Since at least 2019 – and if not before – U.S.-China relations have been [assessed](#) by Chinese observers as increasingly defined by greater tension, competition and conflict. After the travails of Covid-19, U.S.-China tariff 'wars' and U.S.-China tech restrictions, Xi Jinping himself definitively [declared](#) in March 2023 that 'Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development'.

In this context, as [Tong Zhao](#) has noted, China must strengthen its nuclear deterrent capabilities as it believes 'that the United States won't drop its hostility against China unless its hand is forced by robust Chinese strategic power'. Here, the overlaying dynamics of bilateral relations thus reinforce the pre-existing incentives China has in the face of American nuclear superiority for nuclear expansion to ensure a credible second-strike capability.

Finally, Chinese strategists remain sceptical that nuclear escalation can be controlled. Fiona Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel's systematic [examination](#) of Chinese views on nuclear escalation demonstrates that 'Chinese experts' believe that 'if nuclear weapons are used in a conflict — however limited that initial use — subsequent escalation would not be controlled, which restrains leaders from pursuing even limited use'. This view shapes China's operational nuclear doctrine and its force structure, with the [former](#) detailing plans for retaliatory strikes only and the [latter](#) defined by the absence of tactical nuclear weapons.

This sets China apart from both the United States and Russia. The U.S. has long perceived of the difficulty of controlling nuclear escalation to be a feature of nuclear conflict that states could [exploit](#) to coerce each other. In the Cold War, for example, as U.S. and NATO forces in Europe were confronted with superior Soviet conventional forces and a strengthening Soviet nuclear arsenal by the 1970s, U.S. and NATO strategy [instead](#) of 'relying solely on the threat of a massive U.S. nuclear strike on the Soviet Union' would rely on 'using nuclear weapons coercively' by threatening nuclear strikes on Soviet (or Warsaw Pact) military targets 'to convince Soviet leaders that the war was spinning out of control, pressuring them to stop the invasion'.

Russia, too, as demonstrated most clearly in its use of nuclear threats during the war in Ukraine, is another nuclear actor that believes in the controllability of coercive escalation. Moscow's objective in the event of such an escalation, as Keir Liber and Daryl Press [note](#), 'would not be to rectify the conventional military imbalance but to demonstrate in a shocking fashion that the war is spinning out of control and must be ended immediately'.



China's nuclear arsenal expansion should not therefore be understood solely as a straightforward rejection of 'strategic stability' or as evidence of inherently aggressive intent.

China's nuclear arsenal expansion should not therefore be understood solely as a straightforward rejection of 'strategic stability' or as evidence of inherently aggressive intent.

Rather, it is shaped by a distinct Chinese conception of 'strategic stability' that extends beyond numerical parity to include assured second-strike capability, the broader political condition of US-China relations, and a belief that nuclear escalation cannot be reliably controlled. From Beijing's perspective, nuclear modernisation and force diversification are therefore compatible with its NFU doctrine and are intended to secure deterrence under conditions of perceived American pressure and strategic vulnerability.

Appreciating these conceptual differences does not remove the risks posed by China's growing arsenal, but it does suggest that current trends are driven as much by competing understandings of stability as by raw power politics. Recognising this underappreciated ideational dimension is essential if future dialogue on deterrence, crisis management, and arms control between the United States and China is to be meaningful.

Michael Clarke is an Associate Professor in International Politics and Strategy at the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security. He is a nationally and internationally recognised expert in the history and politics of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, (China); Chinese foreign and security policy; American grand strategy; Australian defence and strategic policy; and nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation.

The 2026 National Defence Strategy and Continued Interest in a Rules-Based Global Order

Shannon Zimmerman

Introduction

The concept of the Rules-based Global Order (RBGO) first [appeared](#) in the 2009 Defence White Paper. Since then, the idea of the RBGO has provided a strategic foundation for Australia's major strategic documents. The 2016 Defence White [Paper](#) went so far as to declare it "essential for Australia's security and prosperity". Defending the RBGO is included in all of Australia's recent key strategic defense documents, including the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and the 2024 and 2026 National Defence Strategies. Defence Minister Richard Marles [defended](#) the concept of the RBGO during his press club introduction of the 2026 National Defence Strategy.

At the same time, recent assessments have [argued](#) that our latest defence strategy signals Australia's shift towards a more realist approach to our place in the world. Another possibility, however, could be that Australia is redefining what it understands the rules-based order to entail, moving away from the idea of a US-led liberal international order to a less ambitious idea of the RBGO that better reflects the needs of the Indo-Pacific. This new order, if properly supported, could see the sustainment of some key international laws, rules and norms, despite the lack of a liberal underpinning. It also has the potential to provide protection for small and middle powers in a world that increasingly seems open to great power influence.

The Liberal International Order

For many scholars and policymakers, the terms liberal world order and rules-based global order are synonymous. Historically, this has not been an issue, but the disengagement of the United States from the prevailing global order means the semantics now matter.

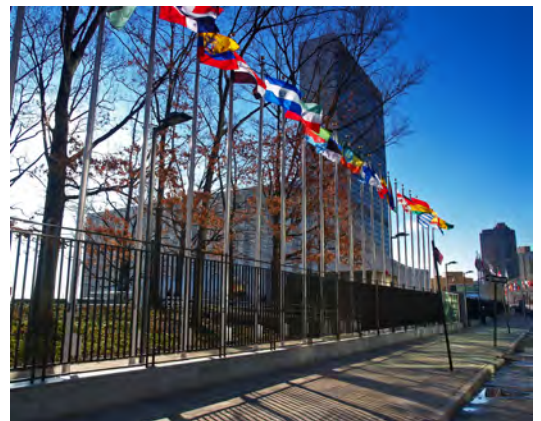
Created after World War II with the intent of addressing global problems and providing collective security, a key [feature](#) of the liberal international order is a system of sovereign states with open relations, governed by international law, international organisations and other agreements. This encompasses defence cooperation but, more importantly, is about constraining power politics.

Less understood, but no less important, is that liberal international order was created specifically in opposition to communism, so it privileges liberal democracies and assumes reliance on the U.S. as global hegemon for mutual defence. So integral are these liberal elements that a [study](#) seeking to define the 'rules-based order' determined that removing its liberal components could "unravel" the order itself.

If our current world order is a system tied to U.S. liberal notions, then the increasing disengagement of the U.S. has been seen as the death [knell](#) of the system itself. However, the order that is in decline - the Liberal international order - can be separated from the rules-based global order, a broader, and less-ideological system which emphasises laws and procedures to maintain global stability, sovereignty and predictability.

Australia and the Rules-Based Global Order

Emerging in the 1990s, the post-Cold War 'rules-based' global order assumed that all countries would eventually adopt the [Washington Consensus](#) and become liberal in nature. This assumption can be seen in Australia's 2013 National Security [Strategy](#), which describes the U.S. as the "critical underpinning" to the rules-based order. After twenty years, however, it became clear that we had not quite reached the "end of history" as Fukuyama [claimed](#) and global liberalisation was unlikely to happen.



At this point Australian Foreign and Defence White papers noted that the rules-based international order, which they assumed to be liberal based, was “under significant challenge” and “showing signs of fragility”. Realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer [argued](#) that the liberal international order was ‘crumbling’ by 2019. This conclusion seemed confirmed by the re-election of Donald J. Trump in 2020, who’s administration swiftly [withdrew](#) the U.S. from dozens of key international institutions it deemed operating contrary to its interests and reoriented U.S. foreign policy to pursue a transactional approach to international relations.

In such an environment, it is [assumed](#) that the global system will return to a balance of power paradigm, where powerful states carve out their own spheres of influence. The 2026 NDS recognises this possibility, noting that the United States needed to maintain a presence to ensure an “effective balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific.” One analysis of the 2026 NDS even argues that the new strategy accepts the return to a [‘might is right’](#) paradigm.



However, the ‘death’ of the liberal international order does not mean we must abandon the underlying architecture.

However, the ‘death’ of the liberal international order does not mean we must abandon all of the underlying architecture. In some ways a more modest rules-based global order has begun to supplant its liberal counterpart already. The rules-based order has already made room for non-democratic and non-liberal states to integrate themselves into key institutions and decision-making forums. Within these frameworks, states – both democratic and otherwise – have agreed to uphold key norms such as territorial sovereignty and respect international law. All of this has been done without needing to be tied to liberal values or the backing of the United States.

In Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney’s [speech](#) at the World Economic forum, he called for middle powers to shape a new order based on collective investments in strategic resilience. Middle powers, like Australia, can play an important [role](#) in this by working for the sustainment of the RBGO. These countries may lack military might but wield considerable [influence](#) in agenda-setting, rule-making and coordination. Rather than leaning into fractures, they can [cultivate](#) these shared norms and promote the additional norms of dialogue, tolerance and consensus. At the same time, middle powers can exert influence based on their particular [strengths](#), such as economic specialisation, geographical location or diplomatic prowess. They have also begun to work together to counter great power influence. This can be seen with the use of formal regional organisations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), or less formal coalitions or voting [blocs](#) within international institutions like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which are acting to mitigate disruption and curb unilateral action by great powers. Minilateral coalitions, often [initiated](#) by middle powers, are also on the rise, to foster additional modes of cooperation. While this may not remove the presence and actions of regional and global hegemon, it may ameliorate the need to rely so significantly on the normative foundation previously upheld by the U.S.

Australia has already shifted towards the language of the rules-based order to appeal to states in the Indo-Pacific. In addition, major actors in the region, such as India, the Philippines and ASEAN, have embraced the concept – in part to specifically manage the influence of great powers.

At the same time, China’s grievances with the liberal world order – such as its emphasis on democracy and individual human rights – would be removed in a rules-based order focused on the interaction between states rather than their domestic affairs. This would leave the rules-based order intact and still capable of constraining, at least to some extent, the use of unchecked power by the great powers. While it may not align completely with a number of Australian values, embracing the idea of the rules-based order rather than hoping for the return of the liberal international order is preferable to a world in which trust between states and societies continues to decrease, and interactions between states become purely transactional.

While it may drop the explicit connection to liberal ideas, the rules-based order does and can have normative components; including constraints on coercion, mechanisms for responding collectively to wars or terrorism and processes for resolving disputes peacefully. In addition, its more comprehensive reach makes it well suited for addressing some of the most pressing transnational security threats facing the region; including transnational terrorism and crime, irregular migration and even concerns over climate change. Recent [research](#) has shown that the climate change regime has remained largely intact, despite persistent political challenges and slow progress.

Australia's Approach to International Order

Australia has already given some indications that it is leaning less towards the idea of a liberal order and more towards the notion of a rules-focused paradigm. The 2026 National Defence [Strategy](#) concedes that the current global order is in transition and it is difficult to foresee what aspects of our existing world order will continue, and which will fall victim to great power rivalry, individual national interests, and general disorder. It is telling that NDS2026 has [downgraded](#) Australia's relationship with the U.S. from one of shared 'ideas and values' to one of shared 'interests', indicating that Australia has acknowledged a divergence from the trajectory of the United States.

NDS2026 also talks about Australia taking greater responsibility for its own security – but this does not need to be an independent endeavour. Self-reliance, as NDS2026 notes, does not mean self-sufficiency but rather “prudent, meaningful and feasible investments to ... mitigate strategic... risks.” This is why the NDS pairs a strategy of denial with the concept of collective deterrence, where allies and partners demonstrate collective capability and resolve. This is another area where middle powers can play a major role.



Middle powers have shown that they can work together to leverage defence diplomacy and economic pressure to change the cost calculations of great powers – the European Union's [response](#) to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a case in point. Military exercises and patterns of engagement are part of this, but the most effective collective deterrence are coalitions of states willing to uphold the global norms of sovereignty, non-interference and freedom of navigation. Understandably, NDS2026 emphasises networks of bilateral and multilateral security partnerships and touches on working with these partners to protect the rules and norms that shape and govern the region and prevent rule by force.

This call is increasingly important as the security challenges Australia is facing are predominantly transnational in nature. Efforts at addressing Australian concerns around the changing character of war, including the impacts of artificial intelligence and the role of human in-the-loop decision making, will only be successful via international consensus. The same can be said for continuing to limit the proliferation and use of nuclear and other types of weapons. Bilateral and even multilateral approaches will not be able to fill the gap left behind if the norms and institutions of the international order are allowed to fail.

Conclusion

While the liberal international order is in transition, Australia does have some influence as to what takes its place. An emphasis on the rules and processes that underpin our existing order is one way that Australia can leverage its middle power status and take greater responsibility for its own security.

Shannon Zimmerman is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Studies at the Centre for Future Defence and National Security. Her research investigates peace operations, specifically the protection of civilians in conflict environments characterised by asymmetric threats. She also studies misogyny motivated terrorism, looking at online groups in the 'Manosphere'. She is currently the convenor of the UN Office of Counter-terrorism's Gender and Identity Factors Platform Community of Practice for Member States. She is an expert in peacekeeping operations and humanitarian and disaster response, defence diplomacy, and countering violent extremism.

A Strategic Mirage? Regime Change from the Air and the Limits of Coercion

Michael Rainsborough

The United Kingdom government '[does not believe in regime change from the skies](#)', declared Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, offering a justification for Britain's decision to stay out of the United States and Israel's strikes against Iran.

Starmer invoked the Iraq war, a campaign that began with overwhelming air power, followed by a rapid ground advance. The invasion toppled Saddam Hussein from power, only to give way to years of [insurgency](#) and [attrition](#). That experience, coupled with the [long](#), wearying effort in [Afghanistan](#), has left a lingering suspicion of promises that war can be conducted cleanly at [distance](#), that precision can substitute for presence, and that a regime can be destroyed from above without the burdens of occupation.

Recent events appear to reinforce the point. With the war entering its third [month](#), and after weeks of sustained strikes against Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has not folded. Despite the targeted assassination of senior figures and leadership cadres, the regime, albeit increasingly factionalised, continues to function, retaliate and adapt. The system has proved resilient rather than brittle.

From this, the claim that one 'cannot have regime change from the air' presents itself as hard-earned common sense. But it has also hardened into a cliché. But is the cliché strictly true?

The difficulty lies in what, exactly, is being asserted. The proposition rests on two terms that are rarely examined with much care: what does one mean by air power and what does one mean by regime change. Once those questions are scrutinised, the certainty begins to soften.

Does air power refer to a stand-alone bombing campaign, or a broader system of surveillance, targeting, and strikes? And what constitutes regime change? The wholesale destruction of a ruling order, the removal of a leadership, or the installation of a compliant arrangement?

Clarifying these questions reveals a more contingent and conditional reality.

The following analysis examines the problem from three angles: what air power can achieve, what constitutes a regime, and the conditions under which coercion from the air might plausibly produce political change.

What Exactly is Victory?

In any serious examination of strategy, one begins with a simple question: what outcome is being sought?

If the aim is constrained, air power can be highly effective. During the 1972 Easter Offensive, North Vietnamese forces advanced in strength across the Demilitarised Zone and into the Central Highlands. The United States responded with a concentrated air campaign, which disrupted logistics, blunted armoured thrusts, and bought time for South Vietnamese forces to stabilise the [front](#). The operation did not end the war, nor did it alter the political trajectory of [South Vietnam](#). It did, however, achieve the immediate aim.



The same logic applies to the current campaign against Iran. If the purpose is to devastate nuclear infrastructure, missile forces, and impose a temporary operational setback, air power may well [suffice](#). If the horizon is measured in years rather than decades, and if recurrence is accepted as part of the cycle, then the method aligns with the aim.

Strategic confusion begins when limited military success is mistaken for political transformation. Degrading a regime's capabilities is not the same as displacing it. Destroying facilities, killing commanders and disrupting networks may weaken a state's ability to act, but it does not necessarily alter its will or dismantle the structures through which it is exercised.

The Iranian case illustrates this clearly. The IRGC is not a detachable appendage. It is woven into the political, economic and security fabric of [the state](#). Targeting its leadership may produce disruption. It does not dissolve the system that produced those leaders, nor the networks that sustain it.

Air power can therefore achieve success, but it depends on how modest one is prepared to be.



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The Problem with 'Regime Change'

The phrase 'regime change' suggests a discrete target: a leadership that can be removed, leaving the rest to fall into place. In practice, regimes are not so obliging.

A ruling order is an arrangement of institutions, interests and narratives. It is embedded in society, [drawing strength](#) from constituencies, patronage networks and structures of control. Removing a leader is not the same as removing a regime, and removing a regime is not the same as remaking a [political order](#).

Three cases are often cited as evidence that air campaigns can produce regime change: Japan in 1945, Serbia in 1999 and Libya in 2011. Each is more complex and ambiguous than it first appears.

Japan, 1945

Strategic bombing, culminating in the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, [produced surrender](#). Yet the existing order was not wholly dismantled. The emperor remained, a condition that was pivotal in Japan's decision to [capitulate](#). Much of the bureaucratic apparatus remained. What changed was the direction of policy, enforced under occupation. The decisive outcome resulted from converging pressures: the cumulative destruction of Japanese cities, the strangulation of maritime supply lines, the advance of Allied forces across the Pacific, and the Soviet Union's entry into the war in [August 1945](#). Air power was significant, but not sufficient in itself to reconstruct the Japanese state.

Serbia, 1999

NATO's 78-day air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – by that stage a state overwhelmingly dominated by Serbia – compelled Slobodan Milošević to accept terms and withdraw from Kosovo. He was later [removed](#) from power and handed over to the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague to face charges of war crimes and genocide. Yet the causal chain is less linear than it might appear. The bombing campaign imposed costs and signalled [resolve](#) but the precise mechanism by which it produced compliance remains contested. Internal political pressures in Serbia, economic strain, and the prospect of a ground invasion all seemingly [played a role](#). The regime did not collapse during the bombing. It adjusted, endured and then conceded. Milošević's eventual downfall in October 2000 came through domestic political processes, catalysed but not dictated by the [air war](#).

Libya, 2011

Libya presents the clearest case of a regime falling under the weight of air operations. NATO strikes degraded Muammar Gaddafi's forces, allowing opposition forces to [advance](#). The regime collapsed, and Gaddafi was killed. Yet this was not a war fought in the vacuum of altitude. It was an intervention into an ongoing civil conflict. Air power acted as an accelerant. The campaign tipped the balance in favour of insurgent forces. The result was [regime change](#) of a sort. However, it did not yield the installation of a stable successor order. Libya [fractured](#) into competing authorities, militias and external patrons. The regime was removed but the state was not reconstituted in any coherent [form](#).

These cases suggest a narrower understanding of what air power can reasonably achieve. Air power can contribute to the removal of a regime, particularly when the leadership is already under pressure. On its own, though, it cannot reliably construct a new political order or produce outcomes that align with the intervening power's preferences.

Air Power Never Acts Alone



Air campaigns rarely operate in isolation. They function within broader strategic environments that may include land forces, internal opposition, economic measures and political dynamics within the target [state](#). In the Pacific War, the bombing of Japanese cities was inseparable from the broader campaign. The capture of islands such as Saipan and Tinian brought the Japanese mainland within range of B-29 bombers. The submarine campaign severed supply lines. Ground operations in Burma, New Guinea, the Philippines, and the island-hopping campaign [eroded](#) Japan's strategic position. Air power was the visible edge of a larger blade.

In Afghanistan in 2001, US air power worked in concert with the Northern Alliance, whose ground advances exploited the effects of precision strikes. The regime collapsed rapidly. It did not do so because of air power alone, but because air power was paired with a viable internal opponent capable of exploiting its effects. Libya followed a similar pattern. NATO aircraft [degraded](#) Gaddafi's forces. Rebel groups, uneven and fractious, moved into the space created by that degradation. The regime fell when these two pressures converged.

In each case air power was effective because it had something to work with. It requires either a ground component, internal or external, or a political dynamic within the target state that can be pushed towards a tipping point. Without such elements, it tends to produce damage without transformation.

This point bears directly on the Iranian case. There is no organised internal force capable of replacing the current regime. While dissent exists, there is no coherent opposition capable of seizing and [holding power](#). Although the U.S. administration suggests it is keeping its options open, the prospect for external ground intervention is not, so far, [on the table](#). Air power, in this context, acts against a system that has no immediate success waiting in the wings.

Waiting for Collapse

The most elusive aspect of coercion from the air is the moment at which pressure produces [compliance](#). Strategists often seek to identify the 'centre of gravity' of an adversary – the point at which applied force will yield decisive [effect](#) – but this is often identified only in retrospect.

The Kosovo campaign is instructive in this regard. NATO expanded its [target set](#) over time, striking military assets, infrastructure and elements of the regime's media apparatus. At some point, the accumulation of pressure produced a decision in Belgrade to accept [terms](#). Whether this was driven by damage to military capabilities, concern over economic collapse, fear of escalation, or internal political calculations remains a matter of [speculation](#). There was no single target whose destruction produced immediate capitulation.

This uncertainty has consequences. If decisive effects cannot be predicted, one must either accept a prolonged campaign or escalate in ways that may carry broader risks. The search for the decisive blow becomes a process of iteration, rather than a matter of design.

Historical experience reinforces this point. In the Second World War, bombing campaigns [failed](#) to break civilian morale. British cities endured the Blitz without collapsing. German cities absorbed extensive damage without producing [political](#) upheaval. In both cases, populations adapted, and in some instances rallied around [existing authorities](#). The expectation that suffering would translate into rebellion was not fulfilled.

Modern regimes are often more resilient still. They control information, manage resources and [suppress dissent](#). The Iranian regime has demonstrated resilience under sanctions, internal unrest and external [pressure](#). It has adapted its methods of control, decentralised certain functions, and embedded itself in economic and social structures.

The idea that a series of air strikes, however precise, will produce a sudden political rupture rests on uncertain ground. Such thinking assumes a vulnerability that may not exist, and a predictability that the historical record does not bear out.

Wars that Refuse to Stay Short

Air campaigns often last longer than anticipated. Expectations of rapid effect give way to incremental pressure: 78 days in Kosovo, seven months in Libya, years in the Pacific.

Prolonged campaigns carry accumulating costs and wider consequences. Damage to infrastructure affects civilian populations, while economic disruption can generate instability beyond the immediate theatre. In the case of Iran, strikes on energy infrastructure or any disruption to the Strait of Hormuz clearly have effects far beyond the battlefield with oil prices, shipping routes and global markets becoming part of the strategic [equation](#).



This uncertainty has consequences. If decisive effects cannot be predicted, one must either accept a prolonged campaign or escalate in ways that may carry broader risks.

There is also the question of what follows success. Libya offers a cautionary example: the removal of Gaddafi without state reconstruction produced fragmentation, greater instability, and a space in which armed groups and external actors could operate with relative freedom. The intervention achieved its immediate aim. It did not secure a favourable long-term outcome.

Strategic judgement requires a willingness to weigh these factors. It is not enough to ask whether a regime can be removed. One must ask what replaces it, how that replacement will be secured, and at what cost.

New Technology, Same Political Problems

Advances in technology have altered the conduct of air operations. Precision-guided munitions, unmanned systems, real-time surveillance, and the integration of data from multiple sources, have increased the reach and responsiveness of [air power](#). Targets can be identified and struck with greater accuracy. Command structures can be disrupted more effectively and individuals located and killed with a level of precision that would have been unimaginable in [earlier conflicts](#).

These developments have revived the belief that air power may achieve what it could not in the past. If one can remove key figures, disrupt communication and degrade capabilities with minimal collateral damage, perhaps the need for ground operations [diminishes](#).

The evidence, however, does not support such optimism.

Precision improves efficiency, but it does not resolve political complexity. [Removing leaders](#) can create disruption. Such actions may induce degrees of political transformation, but often in ways that reinforce a regime's internal [cohesion](#). Decapitation strategies have a mixed record. In some cases, they have weakened organisations. In others, they have hardened [them](#).



The integration of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence now enables sustained pressure at lower risk to the [attacker](#). They do not, though, resolve the problem of what constitutes success, nor does it guarantee that pressure will translate into political change.

The persistent questions remain: what is the objective, what are the means, and how do the two align?

Iran and the Return of Strategic Reality

The current conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran brings these issues into sharp focus. Strikes on nuclear facilities, missile infrastructure and elements of the Revolutionary Guard [reflects](#) a clear military logic: degrade capabilities and signal determination.

Whether such actions will ultimately bring about regime change is less clear. The initial rhetoric of the Trump administration [gestured](#) in that direction, suggesting that damage inflicted on the Iranian state might stimulate a popular uprising. In practice, targeted killings demonstrate reach, but do not dismantle [the system](#). The operational design and subsequent course of hostilities now point to a more limited aim: to secure a favourable [negotiating position](#).

Within that logic, Iran has responded with a combination of resilience and escalation. The potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a tactical move. Rather, it serves as a [strategic signal](#), one that seeks to impose [economic costs](#) on the broader international system. The use of the Strait as leverage reflects an understanding that the conflict extends beyond the immediate effects of the exchange of air strikes.

The resort to economic and strategic pressure beyond the battlefield does not inherently resolve the question of regime durability. That question turns on the regime's capacity to absorb losses, replace leadership and maintain control over key institutions. Additional military pressure, in the form of renewed aerial assaults, may shape behaviour, but is unlikely, on its own, to induce internal collapse.

Conclusion

The notion of regime change from the air persists because it promises control without commitment – the prospect of decisive effect without the burdens of occupation, of transformation without entanglement. The appeal is obvious. The reality is less accommodating.

Air power can coerce and degrade; under certain conditions it may contribute to the removal of a regime. What it cannot reliably do is determine what comes after. Its utility remains subject to the enduring questions of strategy: the clarity of the objective, the presence of complementary forces, and the structure of the target state itself. Air power, in this sense, remains a tool rather than a solution.

In the end, force applied from the air can impose pressure but cannot determine what grows in the ground beneath it.

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Michael Rainsborough is Professor of Strategic Theory, and Director, Centre for Future Defence and National Security.

From the Bookshelf: Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power*, (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Michael Clarke

Sergey Radchenko, (Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies), notes at the very start of this monumental 760-page study that as there has been so much written about the Cold War 'it well near beggars belief that anyone would attempt to retell the story' (p. 3). There thus must be a 'good reason' to revisit this history.

And that reason is flagged by the opening vignette in which Radchenko recounts the profound effects of the death, destruction and trauma experienced by the Soviet Union during the Second World War through the eyes of Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev. As Radchenko notes – 'their personal and collective trauma, and the bitterness and the humiliation, and their pride at having prevailed' (p. 2) – fundamentally shaped the worldview of each of these future leaders of the Soviet Union. What united these quite disparate individuals was a determination 'to shape the future in a way that would assure for the Soviet Union its security, and its place of honor among the great and the mighty of this world' (p. 2).

Radchenko's central contention is that much of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War can be explained by its leaders' desire not only for the Soviet Union to be secure and powerful but to have that security and power be seen as legitimate by other actors in international politics, not least of which by its superpower rival, the United States. From Khrushchev onward, *To Run the World* argues, the Soviet Union's central objective was to 'co-manage' the world with the United States as an equal. This shifts our attention away from more familiar analytical explanations of Soviet behaviour (e.g. ideology, material power, structural conditions) toward the lens of political psychology of individual leaders, the role of status and the politics of recognition and legitimacy.

This search for legitimacy provides the book's conceptual backbone. From Joseph Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev, successive leaders are portrayed as grappling with a mix of insecurity and ambition—seeking both status and validation in an international system that they often felt excluded from. The Soviet victory in World War II, for example, generated what Radchenko describes as a sense of entitlement to global influence, yet this expectation – from the Soviet perspective - was repeatedly frustrated by Western resistance.

In this sense, the book aligns with—and extends—constructivist insights about identity and recognition, while also engaging realist concerns about power and hierarchy. It is a work that bridges theoretical traditions without being reducible to any single one.

The book is organised chronologically into four broad phases—ambition, hubris, decline, and collapse—tracing the evolution of Soviet foreign policy across leadership eras. Radchenko provides rich accounts of key moments: Stalin's postwar expansionism, Nikita Khrushchev's risky brinkmanship, Leonid Brezhnev's global activism in the developing world, and Gorbachev's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to redefine Soviet legitimacy through "new thinking".



What emerges from this narrative is that the Soviet leadership was never able to resolve a central contradiction between the two identities that it emerged from the Second World War with: that of a superpower equal (or at least competitor) to the United States, and that of the leader of world revolution. Both roles carried with them distinct characteristics which were often in conflict.

This is especially revealed in the book's masterful coverage of how this dual identity both drove and complicated the Soviet Union's outreach to the Third World and its relationship with Beijing. With respect to the Third World, Radchenko details how the Soviet desire to uphold their 'revolutionary' credentials by supporting 'national liberation movements' and various anti-American or 'anti-imperialist' regimes from Cuba to Angola undercut the superpower objective of recognition by the United States.

Sino-Soviet relations too were bedevilled from Khrushchev's time in power onward by a hubristic assumption that Moscow could 'tutor' Mao's regime on the finer aspects of 'proletarian' governance simultaneous with an anxiety that China had become the 'vanguard' of 'anti-imperialist' revolution to be emulated by the Third World. Moscow's inability to control or guide Mao Zedong's regime in a variety of situations – from Chinese reactions to Khrushchev's 'secret speech' denouncing Stalin, Chinese behaviour during the 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis, or China's role in the Vietnam War – undercut both Moscow's superpower-derived imperative to be seen as effectively managing its allies and its revolutionary-derived imperative to remain the ideological fountainhead of Marxist-Leninist movements worldwide.

Radchenko's account of Sino-Soviet relations too underscores that by the late 1960s Soviet views were increasingly coloured by Brezhnev's belief that there was an unbridgeable 'civilisational' gap between the Soviet Union and China. In contrast, Brezhnev underscored the common civilisational roots linking the Soviet Union and the West in an attempt to provide normative ballast for détente with the US under the Nixon administration.

By foregrounding psychological and status-driven motivations, Radchenko challenges traditional Cold War historiography that privileges ideology or bipolar structural dynamics.

That analytical move permits Radchenko to centre the role of the inner anxieties of the Soviet leadership with respect to this question of legitimacy and recognition as the organising thread of this detailed and absorbing narrative of the Soviet Union's Cold War. The Soviet Union that emerges from this history is not simply a great power rival of the United States but as a state that was ultimately trapped between ambition and insecurity with a foreign policy that was thus often reactive and shaped by perceived slights as by strategic calculation.

To Run the World, through its analytical focus on the interaction of ambition, legitimacy and insecurity as drivers of foreign policy, thus offers not only an important reinterpretation of Soviet behaviour during the Cold War but also a reminder of the significance of these non-material factors in shaping state behaviour – a reminder that we would do well to heed as we seek to understand and navigate a new era of 'great power competition'.

Michael Clarke is an Associate Professor in International Politics and Strategy at the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security. He is a nationally and internationally recognised expert in the history and politics of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, (China); Chinese foreign and security policy; American grand strategy; Australian defence and strategic policy; and nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation.



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