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THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY SERIES

A publication of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre

October 2020



American Foreign Policy and the 2020 Presidential Election

Bruce W. Jentleson



Strategic & Defence
Studies Centre

The Centre of Gravity series

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Centre of Gravity series paper #54

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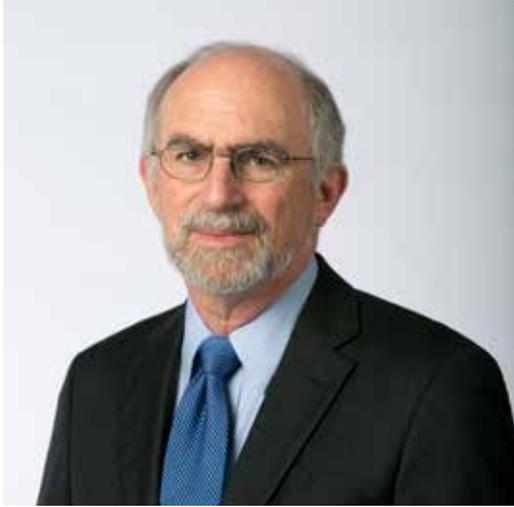
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CRICOS#00120C
ISSN: 2208-7311 (Online)
ISSN: 2208-7303 (Print)



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In 2015-16 he was the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress. He received the 2018 American Political Science Association (APSA) International Security Section Joseph J. Kruzel Award for Distinguished Public Service and the 2020 Duke Alumni Association Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award. He is Co-Director of the Bridging the Gap project promoting greater policy relevance among academics. He holds a Ph.D. from Cornell University.

His most recent book is *The Peacemakers: Leadership Lessons from 20th Century Statesmanship* (W.W. Norton, 2018). His current book is *Economic Sanctions: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Recent articles include "Right-Sizing American Foreign Policy: A Progressive Approach," (*Democracy: Journal of Ideas*, Fall 2019), "Refocusing US Grand Strategy on Pandemic and Environmental Mass Destruction," *The Washington Quarterly* (Fall 2020) and "The United States is Not Entitled to Lead the World," *Foreign Affairs* (with James Goldgeier), September 25, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-09-25/united-states-not-entitled-lead-world>

American Foreign Policy and the 2020 Presidential Election

Bruce W. Jentleson¹

Executive Summary

- ✦ President Donald Trump's handling of the COVID-19 crisis likely will be the single most important factor in the 2020 American presidential election. In some potentially crucial ways foreign policy still may bear significantly on the outcome.
- ✦ Along with overall assessments of Trump's foreign policy record, relations with China, the use of force and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and climate change are key issues. Particular attention should be paid to the views of Millennials.
- ✦ Beyond the specific issues, and irrespective of who wins the election, there are deeper political dynamics of political disequilibrium, toxic brew of swirling societal forces, and an "apart-atop-amidst" historical shift in America's position in the world.
- ✦ America is neither going isolationist nor reverting to the liberal internationalism of the prior era. Domestic politics, broad 21st century geopolitical realities, and lessons of COVID-19 all point to the need for a recalibration of how best to play a constructive role globally as well as with allies like Australia and within the Indo-Pacific region.

Policy Recommendations

- ✦ Core defense and regional deterrence missions as in the Indo-Pacific region, and alliances and partnerships as with Australia, can and should be maintained but with some drawdown of forward deployments and within shrinking defense budgets. It is not in the American or Australian interest for the United States to "leave" the region. Nor, though, is it realistic in either political or policy terms to stick with prior era strategies.

Writings about American presidential election politics can have pretty short shelf life. Wow, how about that dashing young Texan Beto O'Rourke, who beat expectations in his 2018 Senate race, then launched his Democratic presidential candidacy to hosannas as the next coming of John and Bobby Kennedy? Well, he garnered so little support that he dropped out of the race even before we got to 2020. And Joe Biden, all those columns about if he should withdraw after finishing fourth in the early February Iowa caucuses and then fifth in the New Hampshire primary, yet within a month surged to the top and locked up the Democratic presidential nomination? Oh, and what about Donald Trump who back in early 2016 was dismissed as a sideshow but went on to scorch the Republican candidate field, and then defied all those statistical models giving him no more than a 15% chance of defeating Hillary Clinton for the presidency?

Last March when I gave a talk on this subject while in residence at ANU as the Des Ball Visiting Chair and we were still early in the COVID-19 crisis, I noted how unique and unpredictable a factor the pandemic would be. Since then there have been times when it dominated the news, at other times it faded a bit. Finalizing this paper here in mid-October, just after President Trump was diagnosed COVID-positive and his ensuing in/out of the hospital and the attendant melodrama, the pandemic appears likely to be even more of a factor in the election than originally anticipated.

Still, not only does the pandemic have foreign policy elements, the election provides an opportunity to take stock of how American politics affects American foreign policy. As such, I focus on four questions:

- > First, from an historical perspective, does foreign policy matter in American presidential elections? I look across post-1945 presidential elections, this being the period in which the United States has had a major global role.
- > Second, what have been the key particular foreign policy issues over the course of the campaign? Even with the uncertainties between now and election day November 3, poll data and related analyses show patterns as to which issues appear most salient.
- > Third, digging deeper, what are the political dynamics that are not just about Donald Trump, that were percolating before him, would have been there even if Hillary Clinton had won, and will be there whomever wins in 2020?
- > Fourth, how are these politics affecting the role the United States plays globally and in particular in the Indo-Pacific region as we move into this third decade of the 21st century?



Does Foreign Policy Matter in the 2020 Election?

The only times foreign policy has been a major issue in contemporary presidential elections have been during wars (Korea 1952, Vietnam 1972) or major international crises (1980 Iranian hostage crisis and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). In 1952 with the Korean War mired in stalemate the American public had much more confidence in Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower, the triumphant World War II commander of Allied forces in Europe, than in Democrat Illinois Governor Adlai E. Stevenson. In 1972 Senator George McGovern won the Democratic nomination largely on the basis of opposition to the Vietnam War, but his image of being too “dovish” plus Richard Nixon’s “peace at hand” declaration just a month before the election helped get Nixon re-elected. In the 1980 election, along with the economic stagflation of simultaneous high inflation-high unemployment as a major liability for President Jimmy Carter, for many Americans the November 1979 taking of American hostages in Iran was “a powerful symbol of American weakness and humiliation” and, whether fairly or unfairly, the dominant view was “that an inability to bring the hostages home reflected directly on [President Jimmy Carter’s] competence.”²

In fact, in a number of elections the weaker foreign policy candidate won: 1976, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter over President Gerald Ford (who also served as Vice President and House of Representatives Minority Leader); 1992, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton over Cold War and Persian Gulf war triumphant President George H.W. Bush (former Vice President, CIA Director, de facto Ambassador to China); 2000, Texas Governor George W. Bush over Vice President Al Gore (former Congressman and Senator with a strong foreign policy reputation); 2008, freshman Illinois Senator Barack Obama³ over Senator John McCain (Chairman, Senate

Armed Services Committee and decorated Vietnam War hero); 2016, businessman-reality TV star Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (former Secretary of State, Senator).

But to say that foreign policy is electorally less important than domestic policy is not to say that it is unimportant. One of the most frequent polling questions asks about candidates’ leadership qualities. When follow-up questions probe for how to measure leadership, voters very often point to foreign policy and national security. This “bank-shot” effect of foreign policy as a key component in overall assessments of presidential leadership doesn’t get picked up in the usual measure of which issues are

To say that foreign policy is electorally less important than domestic policy is not to say that it is unimportant.



directly ranked as the most important. With Trump's self-styling amidst the COVID-19 crisis as akin to a wartime president, he ended up inviting unfavorable comparisons to the leadership provided in their day by Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁴

Moreover, we should keep in context that other than wars and other crises, it is quite normal for people to prioritize the economy and other closer-to-home issues. But in a close election if even 5 percent of the electorate vote based on foreign policy, given margins like Trump's 2016 ones of less than 1% in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and 1.2% in Florida, the foreign policy marginal difference can be decisive.

Key 2020 Election Foreign Policy Issues

Much polling data seems to point to Trump's foreign policy vulnerabilities. His foreign policy approval rating has never been above 50%, usually in the low to mid-40s.⁵ Even that is buoyed by 86% support among Republicans, while Democrats are at 12% and Independents only 37%. On many of the issues Trump opposes, public support is higher than before he was president: NATO from 53% to 62%, Paris Climate Accord 62% to 68%, Iran nuclear nonproliferation agreement 60% to 66%.

Careful, though, about concluding too much from this. Three aspects of the appeal he does have need to be taken into account. First is what polling analysts and political scientists call issue salience. Voting patterns are determined less by which opinion is held by the most people than who is more likely to vote on the basis of opinion on the particular issue. Take trade policy: Overall views on trade as good for the American economy went up from 59% (2016) to 82% (2019). But many studies have shown that trade opponents give higher salience to this issue than free trade proponents. That my Subaru is less expensive because of trade motivates me less than the Midwestern manufacturing plant worker who lost a job because of trade (or even if from technological automation, blames NAFTA or trade with China or the like). While trade policy grievances go back a number of years, Trump capitalized on these more than prior politicians had.

Second is his tough guy image. He carries that swagger around the world, and gets it reinforced by leaders from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who figured out that staging fawning events that get beamed back to the United States is the surest way to get what they want. Nor is it just Americans. In early March while taking a walk along the beach in Apollo Bay and wearing my Duke University cap, two young Australian men struck up a conversation initially about college basketball. When I told them the work I do, they offered "That Trump, he sure knows how to stand up to those bad guys like Kim Jong Un." My attempt to point out that Kim has actually ratcheted up his nuclear programs and the whole situation is more dangerous now than pre-Trump fell flat. Trumpian theatrics were what they saw.

Third is, on issues like immigration Trump taps into identity politics. The overall America First formulation is against all those "thems" out there. The wall along the Rio Grande has been less substance than symbol. So too bans on Muslim immigration. Labeling COVID-19 the "Wuhan virus," and then in case people didn't get the connection the "Chinese virus," as well as attacks on the World Health Organization (WHO) have been attempts to deflect attention from Trump's own COVID failures to those out there who are not "us".

Moreover, while Joe Biden has plenty of foreign policy experience (Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman as well as Vice President) so too as noted above did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Biden also has his critics both within the Democratic Party over his vote supporting the 2003 Iraq War and among traditional Republicans such as former Defense Secretary Robert Gates who slammed Biden in his 2014 memoir as wrong on "nearly every" major foreign policy issue over the last 40 years.⁶

Turning to some major issues, starting with China, an issue particularly important to Australia, the politics cut in a number of directions. Any number of congressional races over the past decade-plus have seen both Republican and Democratic candidates running campaign ads hitting China on

currency manipulation, manufacturing subsidies, intellectual property theft, and other unfair trade practices. Trump's ratcheting up from trade disputes to trade war is getting mixed reactions. One poll found 67% supporting Trump's tough trade measures, yet in that same poll 63% assessed the United States as being hurt more than China.⁷ Especially hard-hit sectors were less ambivalent, more oppositional. A "weapon of mass destruction," the head of the Apparel Importers Association termed the tariffs; hyperbolic, but making a point.⁸ Soybean exports to China, \$14 billion in 2016, plummeted to \$3.1 billion in 2018.

Two other issues are now also part of the China mix. COVID is one, and being wielded by both sides. Along with the #BeijingBiden Twitter campaign depicting Biden as soft on China, Trump's labeling COVID-19 as the "China virus" has been an effort to deflect blame from his own mishandling of the pandemic to China. For his part Biden ran an ad criticizing Trump for not holding China accountable on COVID-19 – "I would be on the phone with China and making it clear: 'We are going to need to be in your country'" – as well as for Trump businesses allegedly owing tens of millions of dollars to the Bank of China.⁹ The other is "Great Power Competition" grand strategy which has new Cold War with China elements central to it, and has been getting a certain amount of bipartisan buy-in. The Committee on the Present Danger: China, reviving and re-branding the Cold War anti-détente group now bringing together longstanding neoconservatives and rightist populists, recently made its entry to the Washington scene, while some Democratic strategists' call for putting China "at the heart of their pitch to voters."¹⁰ Yet the American public as yet has not been buying in. A June-July 2020 Pew Research Center poll does show a jump to 73 percent with an "unfavorable" view of China (47% in 2016, 60% in 2018) and 78 percent on China being "great deal/fair amount to blame" for the COVID-19 crisis. But on whether China is a partner, enemy or competitor, only 26% take the enemy



A 2020 poll found only 55% seeing China as a "vital threat" and 47% preferring "friendly cooperation and engagement"

view, 57% sticking to the competitor view.¹¹ A Chicago Council on Global Affairs July 2020 poll showed similar patterns with 55% seeing China as a critical threat, but 47% still favoring friendly cooperation and engagement. A Morning Consult poll on responsibility for “the current death toll in the United States from the COVID-19 pandemic” found just as high a percentage blaming “Americans who did not socially distance” as blamed China (73%).¹²

On use of military force issues, late 2018 polls on the Afghanistan war (i.e., even before the ostensible peace deal with the Taliban) showed 61% support for fully withdrawing American troops, even higher among veterans at 69%. The Iraq war gets similar results.¹³ While some deride this as the public lacking staying power, it actually shows a needed pragmatism and prudence. These have been the two longest wars in American history. Close to 15,000 Americans have been killed, total deaths inflicted by all sides are close to 500,000, half of which were civilians. Yet for all this Afghanistan ranks last on the global peace index, Iraq third from the bottom.¹⁴ Indeed, more broadly, only 51% consider maintaining superior military power worldwide to be a very important goal, far less than the immediate post-9/11 68%.

On climate change the politics have been changing in ways that make it more possible to be “doubly green”, i.e. pro-environment and pro-economy (the greenback). While always important among Democrats, climate change rose to one of the top issues in this year’s presidential primaries. But it’s not just Democrats. *Entrepreneur* magazine sees sustainable capitalism as “the next big thing.” With Zillow projecting close to \$900 billion in risks to housing values from rising sea levels, being underwater is taking on a more literal meaning. Over 2,200 businesses and investors, 900 religious groups, and numerous other organizations signed on to the “We Are Still In” pledge against Trump’s renunciation of the Paris climate accord. For the first time in the Pew Research Center’s nearly two decades of polling on climate change, more than 50% of respondents listed it as a top priority.¹⁵ While Trump supporters remain climate change denials, two former Republican Secretaries of State, George Shultz and James Baker, recently co-authored a *Foreign Affairs* article on why the United States should be a global leader on climate change.¹⁶

Space limits constrain discussion of other issues*, but I do want to address a crucial demographic pattern involving Millennials (i.e., the generation born 1981-96).¹⁷ While largely internationalist – e.g., 70% view globalization as good for the United States, higher than other demographic groups – they are less supportive of many aspects of America’s post-1945 global role. Only 50% embrace the American exceptionalism self-concept of America as “the greatest country in the world,” compared to 77% Silent generation (1928-45), 72% Boomers (1945-1964) and 61% Generation X (1965-1980). In a related survey question, only one-quarter of millennials saw the need for the U.S. to be “the dominant world leader.” Only

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* Readers can keep up with these through such sources as the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Pew Research Center, RealClear Politics, and Washington Post-ABC and New York Times-CBS polls.



44% consider maintaining military superiority as a very important goal, also much less than other cohorts. So too on the only 26% favoring increased defense spending. And their 61% prioritizing climate change is higher than any other group.¹⁸

Deeper Political Dynamics

Beyond the specific issues it is extremely important to get at the deeper political dynamics that while exacerbated by Trump were percolating before him, would have been there even if Hillary Clinton had won in 2016, and will be there whomever wins in 2020. Three major patterns:

Beyond the specific issues it is extremely important to get at the deeper political dynamics

Political Disequilibrium: Financial market analysts know that currency exchange rates naturally fluctuate. They only get concerned when those fluctuations push outside an equilibrium zone. So too are fluctuations a normal part of democratic politics. But over the last 20-25 years of American politics there have been two efforts to impeach Presidents (1998, 2019-20), a presidential election that required the Supreme Court to intervene (2000), a decision to go to war that much of the world opposed (2003), policies that set off the 2007-09 Global Great Recession, a swing way in another direction electing an African-American president (2008), and then a thrust in a very different direction electing Trump (2016). Even if Joe Biden wins the 2020 election, can there be confidence that American politics will stay within that political equilibrium fluctuation zone?

Toxic Brew: The instability in American politics is manifesting a toxic brew fed by three swirling societal forces which notwithstanding differences in personalities and other particulars are also riving other democracies.¹⁹ One is economic discontent based on widening economic inequality and narrowing economic opportunity, feeding populisms of the left and the right. Democratic Socialist Senator Bernie Sanders and Trump are the American left-right version, Syriza (Greece) and Podemos (Spain) examples on the European left and Brexit on the right. Second is cultural clash from long-festering racial and ethnic tensions further fed by immigration. Racism against African-Americans traces back to slavery as America's original sin. The progress made in the days of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. has given way to widespread Black Lives Matter protests over the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd and other Black Americans, and American society broadly taking some steps to address systemic racism. We also have been experiencing other violent white nationalism aimed at Hispanics, Muslims, Jews. The European counterpart is mass migration of Syrian and other Middle East-African refugees on top of post-imperial tensions (France's Marine Le Pen, the Alternative for Germany party, Hungary's Viktor Urban, Sweden's Democrats). The third part of this toxic mix is personal insecurity spurred by increased Islamist terrorism at home (e.g., the 2015-16 San Bernardino, California and Orlando, Florida attacks as well as 2015 Paris Charlie Hebdo and 2017 Ariane Grande Manchester UK concert). While such incidents have lessened the last couple years, Muslims attest to the tension they are made to feel on a daily basis.



Anger about economic dislocation, anxiety about cultural tensions, fear about terrorism: Any one of these dynamics would be dangerous to democracy. The three together really do make for a toxic brew, especially when stirred by those who feed and exploit it on both sides of the Atlantic.

Apart-Atop-Amidst: Third is the “apart-atop-amidst” historical perspective on Americans’ sense of their position in the world.²⁰ From its founding into the early 20th century the United States kept itself largely *apart* from the world. While not as isolationist as often depicted, insulated by the oceans and blessed by a bountiful land, it was able to selectively engage with the outside world when and where it chose. During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, there was a sense of sitting *atop* the world. Militarily, economically, technologically, diplomatically, politically, ideologically – the US was dominant by most every measure, indeed with the fall of the Soviet Union the sole surviving superpower. Today, though, with insulation stripped away amidst globalization and dominance chipped away as other countries assert themselves, Americans find themselves neither apart nor atop but rather *amidst* the world, both shaping and being shaped by global events and forces. As formidable as are the policy challenges thus posed, even more fundamental is the shock to the very sense of self as a nation. It is in this context that Trump’s mix of reverting to being apart and re-asserting to be atop has been having its appeal to the national psyche.

Will the fluctuations in American politics stay within an acceptable equilibrium zone? Can the economic-cultural-security brew be de-toxified? What mix of pride and adaptation will it take to constructively adjust to being shaped by but still having capacity to shape this 21st century world? While a Biden victory bodes much better for positive answers, the questions will still be there.

2020 Politics and the Future of American Foreign Policy

There are even more uncertainties than those discussed herein. Congressional elections are one, and whether or not the same political party controls both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Most analyses as of now point to the Democrats retaining a majority in the House of Representatives. The Senate, currently 53 Republicans-47 Democrats, is looking like it will flip to a Democratic majority.

Even with so little time to go, impactful events may still emerge. Will Trump fully recover from COVID-19? What if Biden were to come down with the virus? What about a Trumpian engineered “October surprise” seeking to counter what may look like an electoral defeat? If he loses, would Trump resist leaving office?

Here too while such questions keep us well short of hard and fast predictions, I’m confident about two not-going-to-happen scenarios.

Marking one parameter, America is not going isolationist. For 45 years the Chicago Council on Global Affairs has surveyed whether the United States should “take an active part” or “stay out” of world affairs. In the most recent survey (2020), take an active part got 68%.²¹ This was even higher than 2016 (64%) and in the upper segment of the 45-year range. Americans get it that we can’t just pull up the drawbridges, that we are interconnected in so many ways that can’t be disconnected — being “amidst the world” as just discussed. The debate is over what “active part” means. Does it mean assertive nationalism America First-style of throwing US weight around to pressure others to do more and do things our way, using military force at times and places of our choosing, and other unilateralist wielding of American power? Or does it mean working with others in ways geared to mutuality and shared interests?

Marking the other parameter, there is no going back to the “atop” period. The Liberal International Order was showing substantial signs of strain even before Trump started bull-dozing it.²² And, putting aside rose-colored history, American Cold War policies were hardly fully successful or purely positive. The American public actually seems to get this. A 2019 study by the Center for American Progress, a Democratic oriented think tank, found that “traditional language from foreign policy experts about ‘fighting authoritarianism and dictatorship, ‘promoting democracy,’ or ‘working with allies and the international community’” uniformly fell flat with voters in our groups.”²³ Chicago Council polling on “dominant world leader/shared leadership/no leadership role” showed 61% preferring shared leadership, and within that with independents (62%) tracking closely with Democrats (68%; Republicans only 49%).²⁴

Broad geopolitical realities have been reinforcing these domestic political dynamics in both making isolationism simply not possible given the interconnectedness of the contemporary world, and changing the nature of threats and the distribution of power in ways requiring fundamental recalibrations of U.S. strategy. On top of this COVID-19 makes it hard to argue with the view that, as two leading defense analysts put it, “defending the homeland from catastrophic threats is far more urgent than defending against foreign threats far from American shores.”²⁵ Nor is this just an immediate effect of COVID-19 response. “In a globalized world, we all swim in a single microbial sea,” as Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Norwegian Prime Minister and arguably the most successful recent WHO Director-General warned back in 2001 and as all national security planners must now take much more into account on an ongoing basis.²⁶

Given this broad strategic context core defense and regional deterrence missions as in the Indo-Pacific region, and alliances and partnerships as with Australia, can and should be maintained but with some drawdown of forward deployments and within shrinking defense budgets. It is not in the American or Australian interest for the United States to “leave” the region. Nor, though, is it realistic in either political



or policy terms to stick with prior era strategies.²⁷ The United States needs to recognize that Australia and others have interests both in engaging with and restraining China, providing support while avoiding counterproductive pressuring for bipolarization of the region.²⁸

Both of us, Americans and Australians (others of course as well), are going to have to find the balance of politics and policies serving our mutual interests as we move into this third decade of the 21st century at least as well as they were served in prior decades.

Policy Recommendations

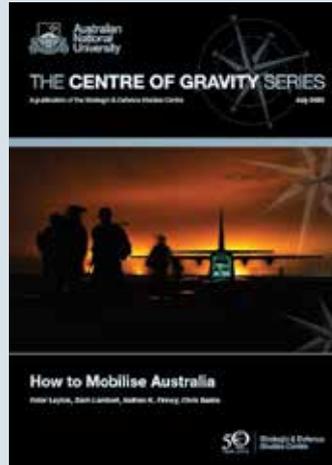
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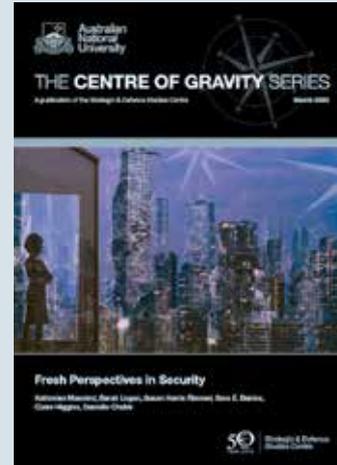
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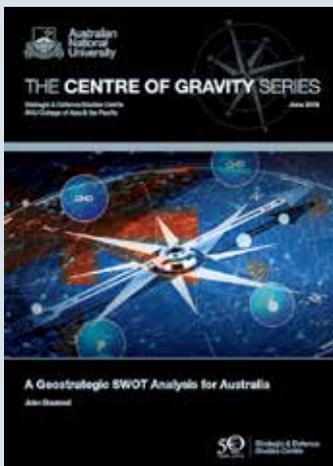
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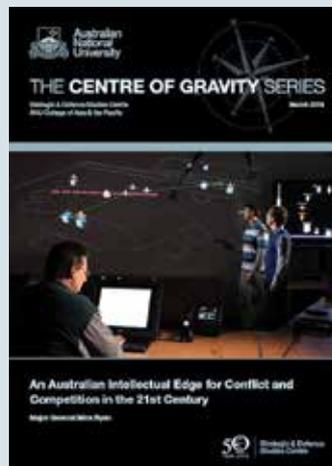
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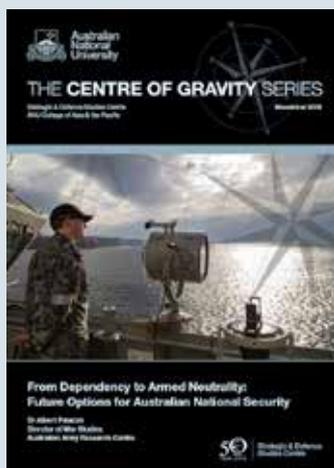
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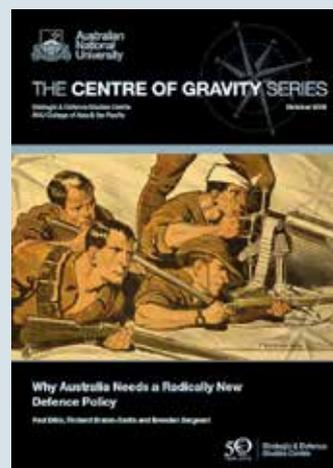
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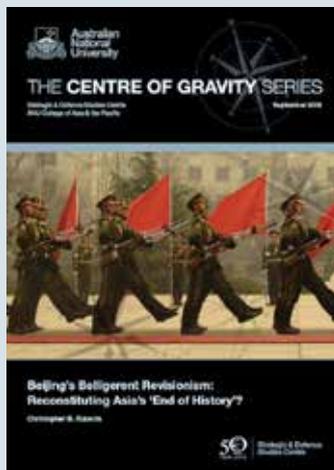
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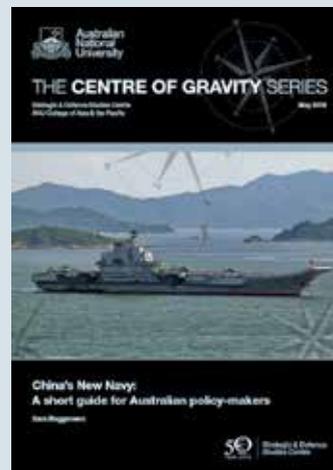
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Endnotes

- 1 Thanks to Elise Bousquette for research assistance
- 2 Bruce W. Jentleson *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 5th edition, p. 83
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