

A Geostrategic SWOT Analysis for Australia

Professor John Blaxland

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Professor John Blaxland provided a sobering lesson in strategic thinking at his dual presentations to RUSI Queensland on 17 April. His lecture on the geostrategic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to Australia was a systematic analysis and assessment of the major shifts occurring in the Indo-Pacific region that left the audience enlightened while challenging our collective complacency. He reprised his lecture after a wonderful dinner conducted at the Tattersalls Club.

At his lecture Professor Blaxland set the strategic landscape with a review of the spectrum of global security challenges. He described how the interactions of economics, environment, politics, human movement, cyber activity, and homeland security – including maritime interests – will converge to present a new regional dynamic that will challenge traditional thinking on Australia's strategic calculus. Using the image of Australia positioned centrally on a hemispherical map, Professor Blaxland demonstrated the overarching importance of the Asian archipelago and land masses to our north, and the dominance of the oceans to our East, West and South. This graphic construction encouraged variations to the usual approach to strategic thinking about Australia's place in the world, including the introduction to the mind's eye of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean as near-future contested areas.

Key insights from the presentations included the realisation that Australia's strengths are declining relative to the rise and presentation of new capabilities and threats in our region. He stressed the need to upgrade our level of strategic thought – to move away from a short-term reactive approach to regional stimuli, and imagine a strategic role for Australia's place in the region.

Professor Blaxland highlighted the importance of Indonesia to Australia's future security but explained that we have not done enough to ensure this nation will remain engaged in ways that support our interests. Meanwhile, China's inexorable rise in the region will likely have the effect of splitting Australia's efforts to the point of ineffectiveness. This is no more apparent than in the contest for the micro states of the Pacific. Too little, too late, may be the analysis of future historians reviewing Australia's foreign policies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Professor Blaxland complemented his lecture with an outstanding after-dinner speech that delved more deeply into the nuances of international relationships, and global acquiescence in the face of an eastern hemisphere dominated by new power dynamics in the region. The lively, and extended, Q&A session was enthralling. Former politicians, serving and former ADF personnel, defence industry representatives and other members of the public joined RUSI Queensland members for

wonderful insights into Australia's geostrategic circumstances. We look forward to welcoming Professor Blaxland back to RUSI Queensland.