

Top intelligence chief warns China's 'troubling' strategic convergence with Russia poses threat to democracies

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Russia and China recently struck a new "no limits" strategic pact. (Reuters: Kim Kyung-Hoon)

One of Australia's top intelligence chiefs says China is intent on establishing "global pre-eminence" and says its "troubling" strategic convergence with Russia will pose new threats to liberal democracies like Australia.

The Director-General of the Office of National Intelligence, Andrew Shearer, has offered a grim assessment of Australia's strategic outlook at the Australian Financial Review Business Summit.

Mr Shearer said China's authoritarian turn under President Xi Jinping was partly driven by the Chinese Communist Party's desire to supersede the United States as a global power.

"We see a leader who is really battering down and hardening his country for this struggle to overtake the United States as the world's leading power," he said.

"That's the assessment of the US intelligence community of China's intent [and] it's also our assessment of China's intent.

Key points:

- The Director-General of the Office of National Intelligence says China wants to establish primacy in the Indo-Pacific region
- Russia and China struck a new "no limits" strategic pact just weeks before the invasion of Ukraine
- He says there were "legitimate doubts about American staying power" after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan



Mr Shearer says Chinese President Xi Jinping wants to supersede the US as a global power. (Reuters: Damir Sagolj)



"And the way station, if you like, the base camp for getting to that position of global pre-eminence, is to establish primacy in the Indo-Pacific region.



"A situation where other countries in the region, across South-East Asia, across the Pacific, including Australia, have to defer to Beijing's choices."

Russia and China struck a new "no limits" strategic pact just weeks before Russia's President ordered troops into Ukraine.

Mr Shearer said that agreement was a "symbol" of a "troubling new strategic convergence" between Beijing and Moscow.

"What we're seeing is that increasing cooperation between these authoritarian powers," he said.

"I do think it tells us that we're going to have to work much harder to maintain the liberal quality of the rules-based order in Europe and here in the Indo-Pacific region."



The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan left many questioning American power, Mr Shearer says. *(Reuters)*

He struck a more optimistic tone on the United States-led response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, saying the wide-ranging sanctions imposed on Moscow by a host of countries across Europe and Asia showed that "reservoirs of American power still run deep".

"I think, particularly after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there were legitimate doubts about American staying power, but I would contend that the US response to what's playing out in Ukraine has been robust [and] as effective as it could be in a very difficult situation."

But Mr Shearer also warned that while Ukraine's resistance had been much stronger than many analysts expected, Russian President Vladimir Putin was "very determined" to take the country because he had "everything at stake".

"It's very hard to see a sort of elegant or even inelegant dismount from this for Putin and his tactics, in our judgement, will become more and more brutal," he said.

"We're seeing that in the shelling of innocent women and children and other civilians just in the last few days ... so we are in for a very brutal, bloody couple of weeks, in our judgement."



Families have been forced to take shelter in Mariupol and other parts of Ukraine.

(AP: Evgeniy Maloletka)

Quad and Europe need to 'push back' on authoritarian impulses

He also expressed frustration at the Biden administration's economic strategy in Asia.

Former US president Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the massive Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal and Joe Biden has made it clear the US will not re-join it under his presidency.

Senior US officials have instead promised to develop an Indo-Pacific "economic framework" focusing on supply chain resilience, infrastructure, clean energy and the digital economy, but progress has been slow.

"Do they need to do more on trade and investment? Do they need to have a proper regional economic plan? Absolutely," Mr Shearer said.

"And we badger them mercilessly about that, I can assure you, day in, day out."

Mr Shearer said Australia needed to respond to the deteriorating strategic environment by "hardening" its economic and political systems from coercion and foreign interference, and said an increasing number of countries across Asia and Europe realised they were facing a common threat from authoritarian states like Russia and China.

"We're dealing with it in like-minded partnership with an increasing range of countries," he said.

"[This gives us] the ability to stake out positions defending the liberal aspects of the world order that that give us some hope of at least curbing some of China's more assertive behaviour."

And he said democratic countries were not just focused on balancing China's swelling military might but also ensuring that global rules governing new technologies were "conductive" to democracies

rather than autocracies.

"We can't win that fight on our own. Not even the United States can win that fight on its own," Mr Shearer told the summit.

"But the US, Australia, India, Japan, plus the massive normative power of Europe, can actually make a difference in pushing back on some of these authoritarian impulses."

