



GLOBAL MATTIS: THE NEW SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Brendan Thomas-Noone
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ALLIANCE BRIEF

The nomination of General James N. Mattis to the position of Secretary of Defense in the Trump Administration is a reassuring sign for many allies of the United States, as well as those who are supportive of a continuing US commitment to a rules-based liberal world order. Mattis, a career combat military officer who previously held senior command positions within NATO and retired as the head of US Central Command (CENTCOM) in 2013, has expressed strong support for US engagement in the world, reaffirmed commitment to US allies and has talked about the need to confront nations that are attempting to revise established international law and norms. For as long as Mattis is in the Trump Administration, it is likely he will be a stabilising voice and an advocate for US allies like Australia.

Committed to US engagement and the global rules-based order

Since retiring from military service General Mattis has been a consistent advocate for US engagement in the world and has shown support for the international rules-based order as well as confronting revisionist powers. This is nominally a positive sign for Australia, which has based much of its national security planning on sustained levels of US presence in the region, and its support for the “rules-based order”.¹ As Mattis has written, the United States “must not lose sight of the fact that the international order we built from the ashes of World War II is worth defending and strengthening”.² He has talked about the sacrifices that the United States made after the Second World War, including the Marshall Plan and the military defence of Europe. On the latter point, he has spoken on how an Australian Ambassador to Washington (Kim Beazley) impressed upon him the magnitude of the US commitment to Europe following the Second World War: “He said,

‘You could have turned your back on Europe after two world wars... Instead the American presidents [say]... we are going to commit 100 million dead Americans and our nuclear war to keep Western Europe safe.’”³ To understand how much this commitment meant to US allies, and the example it provided, Mattis stated that “you have to look at it through a non-American’s eyes”.

Mattis appears to hew to traditional notions of what a commitment to this international order would look like. He has written in support of the United States ratifying the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea, saying such international institutions and treaties are “manifestly in our interest”.⁴ Critically, it is clear that Mattis is supportive of US engagement across a broad array of international policy areas and has said that the United States has often taken institutions like “Bretton Woods, NATO” for granted.⁵ He has argued that the United States needs to return to a time when

it engaged intensively “in setting rules and establishing cooperative norms of behaviour, fostering mutually beneficial trade arrangements, creating institutions and getting them to work”.⁶ Mattis has often tied this upholding of international rules with working with US allies, like Australia.

Champion of allies

One of the most common recurring themes that General Mattis speaks of is his strong commitment and belief in the power of the US alliance system. A Department of Defense (DoD) run by General Mattis will very likely ask for more from US allies like Australia. As far as Mattis is concerned, building coalitions with likeminded countries and increasing engagement with US allies is crucial to sustaining the international order.⁷ But this is also underpinned by fierce loyalty, as Mattis has previously stated that “you can’t find allies like that if you don’t stand by them in their difficulties”.⁸ Under questioning during his Senate confirmation hearing, Mattis stated simply that “nations with allies thrive, nations without allies don’t”.⁹ Further, Mattis believes that allies are central to US history. In a co-authored book, he wrote that unilateralism is sometimes “necessary” but it is “costly” and that it is “also inconsistent historically with America’s greatest achievements, when we led alliances of responsible nations in worthy causes”.¹⁰

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Mattis has previously specified “traditional” allies that he believes the United States needs to increase its military ties with, including NATO, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Middle Eastern nations (Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia).¹¹ As recently as July 2016 he even argued for an expansion of the US alliance system to countries like India, Mexico, Vietnam and Brazil.¹² On India, he argued that the US “should continue to pursue a long-term

strategic relationship with India based on convergence of our interests and our shared democratic values”.¹³ He also supports the role of allies like Australia in US defence industry projects. Under Senate questioning Mattis ultimately supported the F-35 program, arguing that the aircraft “bonds the United States tightly together” with its allies.¹⁴

China, South China Sea and the rebalance to Asia

For Australia, Mattis’ ideas on how the United States should engage China and handle tensions in the South China Sea are particularly important. Mattis believes that the United States is in strategic competition with China but it needs to be “managed” and an integrated strategy involving diplomatic, economic and military tools is needed.¹⁵ However, he is clear in stressing the importance of the deterrent component of this equation: “We need to make sure that our diplomats are engaging from a position of strength when dealing with a rising power.”¹⁶ In 2015 during a lecture in Australia, Mattis stated that he believes Beijing has “shredded trust between nations that thought you could settle things by talking about it”.¹⁷

However, where the Obama Administration’s rebalance fits into his strategic view of Asia and whether Mattis intends to advocate for the continuation of the policy is unclear. When asked about the US rebalance during his Senate testimony, Mattis was somewhat noncommittal. Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii questioned him over the importance of the Indo-Pacific, and Mattis answered broadly: “the US has worldwide responsibilities and certainly the Pacific looms large in that.” This answer paled in comparison to statements made on other regions, such as the Middle East. It is still difficult to tell how Mattis will prioritise Asia given his intense focus on the Middle East for much of his career. That said, some of his early and formative postings were in the Pacific area of responsibility.

If Mattis is keen to continue military aspects of the rebalance to Asia, and if he is successful in advocating for an “integrated” strategy in dealing with China, allies in the region like Australia will likely be called on to do more. Mattis could potentially prioritise increased regional readiness. This may include more frequent military exercises and increased basing of higher-end military assets in Asia. On specific issues surrounding the South China Sea, Mattis has generally traced the

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Obama Administration’s line. When questioned about Chinese actions there, he echoed current US policy and called for Washington to ensure freedom of navigation: “The bottom line is, sir, the international waters are international waters.”¹⁸ But at other times, he has talked of the need to increase pressure on China’s ability to control territory in the South China Sea, saying that in light of China’s activities the shipbuilding budget of the United States may not be sufficient.¹⁹ This fits with a common Mattis theme: US diplomacy should be multifaceted and not be based solely on military power, but it should be conducted from a position of strength.

Russia and Iran

It is likely that the issue of US policy towards Russia will be the first — and perhaps last — sticking point between a Secretary of Defense Mattis and other senior national security members of the Trump Administration. In contrast to President Trump and National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael T. Flynn, Mattis has been fairly unequivocal in his belief that Russia is a “predatory” state that prizes “its own sovereignty, but destroys that of others”.²⁰ This seems to be a consistent belief of the General’s; journalist Steve Coll reported that in his meetings with Mattis in 2011 he seemed “sentimental about the independence of the Baltic states... and unsentimental about Russia”.²¹ During his Senate confirmation hearing Mattis stated clearly that he considered Russia to be “first among the principle threats” facing the United States. This sentiment is backed up by his statements on NATO as well, saying the grouping is perhaps the “most successful modern military alliance... ever” and that Russia’s strategic goal is to “break” it.²²

In terms of Iran, Secretary of Defense Mattis is likely to support the nuclear deal reached in 2015, but he is for strengthening conventional deterrence against

Iranian influence and any potential military provocation. Mattis’ opinions and, as some have argued, long-held “grudge” against Iran have been fairly well documented.²³ It appears that Mattis does consider Iran to be an exceptional threat to both stability in the Middle East and to the United States overall.²⁴ Whether this is due to his command history in the region or, as others have suggested, the Marines’ institutionalised animosity towards the country is unclear.²⁵ Regardless, Mattis’ position on Iran is in fact more nuanced than reporting might suggest. He believes that Iran presents “five military threats” to its neighbours and the United States. Iran’s nuclear program was one of these threats, and while the 2015 nuclear agreement is not perfect and does not amount to a “friendship treaty”, it has at least stalled the program and the United States has to “live up to it”.²⁶

Deterrence and readiness

General Mattis’ consistent views on how the United States should shape and improve its conventional deterrence could change priorities of the Department of Defense from those that have been championed by Ash Carter. One of the more consistent arguments the General has made since retiring from the military in 2013 has been the lack of combat readiness of US military forces and the detrimental effect this has had on deterrence. For Mattis, combat readiness is a central element of conventional deterrence, and calls for an increase in operational tempo, training and deployments. “Deterrence is critical” in facing down revisionist powers like Russia and China, Mattis said at his Senate confirmation hearing.²⁷ This belief in the importance of military readiness likely stems from the lessons the General drew from the 2006 Lebanon War, displayed in his 2008 memo *Guidance for Effects Based Operations*.²⁸ Broadly, the General argued that the joint force at the time was too reliant on certain technologies, precision-warfare and centralised leadership. Instead, “the joint force must act in uncertainty and thrive in chaos, sensing opportunity therein and not retreating into a need for more information”.²⁹ Also, the way Mattis criticised this well-established policy, through a considered and well-thought through memo, may also be an indication of how he will operate within the Trump Administration.

This may signal a step-change in DoD’s focus under Carter, who has made it clear he believes in order for the United States to maintain conventional deterrence

against its competitors, it must double down on technological innovation.³⁰ While a focus on innovation and technological edge will remain a priority at the DoD — particularly if Obama Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work remains — Mattis’ repeated statements on how battlefield readiness should be the focus of all planning decisions may signal a shift in budget priorities towards this goal.³¹ This could have implications for US training and deployments to Australia, including requests for an increased rate of rotations, more military exercises and more Australian-based US troops. The major obstacle for the General in shifting DoD budget and planning priorities will be sequestration, a policy he has likened to “salami slicing”.³²

Secretary of Defense in a Trump Administration

While Mattis will potentially be a dissenting voice among the advocates of an ‘America First’ foreign policy in the Trump Administration, the president has the final decision on national security issues. The Department of Defense is a hugely influential office with its own set of intelligence agencies, diplomats and 16 per cent share of the federal budget.³³ It has considerable leeway in forging US foreign policy in its own right and plays an important role in signalling and projecting deterrence. But this secretary of defense will have widely contrasting views with his president on the basics of who US adversaries are, the role of alliances and the relationship between the United States and the correct international system. A significant indicator, from an Australian perspective, of the effectiveness

of Mattis as secretary of defense will be his ability to both reassure allies, as well as cut through the noise generated by other national security members of the Trump Administration. Another factor to watch will be his ability to manage his likely competitors in the administration, like National Security Advisor Michael T. Flynn, and his ability to forge alliances with other members of the national security team like the Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, a former deputy commander of Mattis during Operation Enduring Freedom.³⁴

In the opening weeks and months of Mattis’ tenure as secretary of defense, there are three things to watch for. The first will be to see how successful the General is in picking his own personnel for his wider portfolio, an area that has already led to tension with other members of the Trump Administration.³⁵ The General’s ability to control DoD policy will also be predicated on the second element, which will show how much access Mattis is granted to Trump, and particularly his ability to navigate through the president’s close inner circle, some of whom have strong views on national security and foreign affairs.³⁶ Lastly, much will depend on how much interest Trump himself takes in defence. If Mattis becomes bogged down in defence industry issues sparked by Trump’s tweets on the F-35 or is forced to spend the majority of his time reassuring allies, then other areas of his policy agenda will suffer. If Mattis is successful in pushing through his agenda, he will bring his global and more traditional views to the Pentagon. Allies like Australia could be expected to do more, but within a framework committed to engaging with and upholding a rules-based order. But it’s still a Trump White House.

Endnotes

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About the author



Brendan Thomas-Noone

Brendan Thomas-Noone is a Research Fellow in the Alliance 21 Program at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. His interests include international security, nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and the politics of cyberspace.

Brendan was formerly a Research Associate in the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy where he worked on nuclear deterrence and policy in Asia, maritime security affairs and Australian defence policy. He was also an editor and contributing writer for *The Interpreter*.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts with Honours and a Master of International Relations from the University of Melbourne where he focused on US foreign policy and modern history. Brendan has also received a Master of Science in Global Politics from the London School of Economic and Political Science where his dissertation explored the theoretical interactions between the internet and state sovereignty in China.

Brendan has also interned with the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. and with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

Cover photo: Secretary of Defense James Mattis greets US Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford at the Pentagon, 21 January 2017
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United States Studies Centre

Institute Building (H03)
The University of Sydney NSW 2006
Australia

Phone: +61 2 9351 7249

Email: us-studies@sydney.edu.au

Twitter: @ussc

Website: ussc.edu.au