
The 2013 Defence White Paper: Strategic Guidance Without Strategy

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The 2013 Defence White Paper places greater emphasis than its predecessors on defence engagement, and begins to link regional security to the defence of Australia itself. It does not explain, however, what Australia has to do to achieve its objectives, or what commitments it would have to enter to do so. Overall, the White Paper moves towards a reinterpretation of 'self-reliance' that focuses more on the way in which Australia would operate in a coalition conflict, but developing a new defence strategy that links force structure, posture and employment to the achievement of Australia's strategic objectives is left to future White Papers.

In the foreword to the 2013 White Paper, Defence Minister Stephen Smith writes that "to protect and defend our people and protect and enhance our national security interests" it was necessary to make "complex strategic judgements about risks and opportunities in the international strategic environment", and that the document "outlines the capabilities that the Australian Defence Force will need ... to address strategic challenges."¹ The logical link between these elements of the White Paper is Australia's strategy, which should derive guidance on the future shape and use of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) from strategic objectives. However, what the White Paper terms Australia's 'military' or 'maritime strategy' is no more than a statement of an operational approach and priorities.

What Determines the Shape and Size of the ADF?

The 2000 White Paper established a framework of five strategic objectives: The defence of Australia; security and stability of the Southwest Pacific and East Timor, including the absence of bases of hostile powers in that region; security and stability of Southeast Asia; security and stability of the wider, now 'Indo-Pacific' Asian system; and global security. The 2013 White Paper continues to use this basic framework, as did the 2009 White Paper, to frame Australia's defence interests, objectives and policy.

The principle that the ADF is structured for the first two objectives, but used to achieve all five, provides an important element of continuity from 2000 to 2013. No justification is, however, attempted in this White Paper for the number of aircraft, ships, submarines or battalions that the government intends to purchase with its citizens' taxes. To be fair to the 2013 White Paper, this is not a new shortcoming.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013), p. ix.

In 2000, the Howard Government reportedly instructed that existing capability was to be maintained, enhanced or replaced as part of the White Paper process. This spared Defence the need to confront any existential questions, or to link the proposed force structure in detail to the new strategic framework.² In 2009, the Rudd Government decided to double the future submarine fleet without any justification of the new (or old) numbers. However, these two White Papers at least provided a rough justification of the size and posture of the Army. Based on the Timor experience, the 2000 White Paper stated that Army should be able to deploy one brigade and one battalion on concurrent operations,³ which the 2009 White Paper increased to one brigade and up to two separate battalions.⁴ In contrast, the corresponding paragraph in the 2013 White Paper omits any reference to force levels.⁵ The last time an Australian Government laid out a strategic rationale for the force structure that it buys with its taxpayers' money remains the 1987 White Paper, drawing on the 1986 Dibb Review.

Since the 1960s, Australian strategy has relied on the 'Defence of Australia' to determine *types* of capabilities held in the Australian armed forces. Despite its name, the strategic essence of the so-called 'DoA era' was the concept of 'self-reliance': Australia sought the ability to defeat credible attacks against the country without relying on the combat forces of its allies. Combined with considerations about warning and regional capabilities, the concept of 'self-reliance' was used to make arguments about the necessary size, sophistication and readiness of the ADF, and contained a strategy of how the ADF could be used to secure the country: As it would not require the direct combat assistance of others, Australia did not need to structure or posture the ADF to work with others; it therefore did not have to structure or commit to use the ADF to build regional coalitions or alliances on which Australia's direct security would depend; and any contributions would thus be made from within the 'DoA' force structure. The 2013 White Paper comments on Australian strategy show that all of these considerations need to be reinterpreted, but it contains only vague hints at a new direction.

A Subtle Shift on Warning and Expansion

One of the good elements of the 2009 White Paper was that it brought back to Australian strategic guidance, after a hiatus in the 2000 White Paper, the explicit consideration of warning and expansion times. The 2013 White Paper also states that

² Hugh. White, 'Buying Air Warfare Destroyers: A Strategic Decision', *Issues Brief* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2005), p. 3.

³ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2000), para 8.14.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), paras 10.7-9.

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 5.15.

In the event that a direct threat to Australia materialised—in the form of a concerted attempt to encroach on our sovereignty or annex our territory rather than an isolated or limited strike—we would require an even stronger ADF than is currently planned.⁶

It explicitly mentions as options for expansion the growth of the Amphibious Ready Element into an Amphibious Ready Group, and the acquisition of a naval strike capability.⁷ When the 2013 White Paper refers to the “strategic importance” of Australia’s shipbuilding industry,⁸ it does not however discuss of the relative merits of industry for the sustainment of the ADF, or as a base for force expansion, as earlier papers have done.⁹ It is in a purely industrial context that the government mentions it would “consider” adopting “a ‘rolling build’ approach to shipbuilding”—an approach that has allowed Japan to increase its submarine fleet from 16 to 22 after its 2010 defence review.¹⁰ Four years after the return of warning and expansion considerations to strategic guidance, and four years after the decision to build the new submarines in Australia, there is thus still little clarity on what expansion would look like, or what it would be based on.

The White Paper makes references to regional capabilities and intentions as indicators for warning.¹¹ Both operate on very different timescales: Readiness generally can be adjusted to warning of changes in regional intentions—for example, the government increased Army readiness in 1999 before the Timor intervention. Acquiring new capabilities, however, would take longer, and traditionally Australia has tied warning of new regional capabilities to expansion of ADF force structure. In order to develop concepts of warning and expansion beyond the embryonic forms in the 2009 and 2013 White Papers, government thus needs to provide clear guidance on what it wants warning of, and what it wants the expanded ADF to do.

⁶ Ibid., para 3.39.

⁷ Ibid., paras 8.14-15. The 2009 White Paper had decided to acquire the latter, in the form of land-attack cruise missiles. Unlike the 2009 White Paper—or, for that matter, the 2012 US Strategic Guidance—the 2013 White Paper does not call for the acquisition of ‘fully developed’ capability and more. Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, paras 8.62, 10.8; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Defense Budget Priorities and Choices* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2012), pp. 4, 6—7.

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 8.45.

⁹ Instead, the only mention of a specific strategic purpose of industry in the 2013 White Paper are ‘opportunities’ in regional defence engagement. Ibid, paras 6.4, 6.38, 12.2, 12.5.

¹⁰ Ibid., para 12.55. In an accompanying press release, the Government said that it “supports” the recommendation of the *Future Submarine Industry Skills Plan* to use a ‘rolling build’ approach. Prime Minister, Minister for Defence, Minister for Climate Change, Industry and Innovation and Minister for Defence Materiel, ‘2013 Defence White Paper: Naval Shipbuilding: Release of the Future Submarine Industry Skills Plan’, *Joint Media Release*, 3 May 2013. Because Japan regularly replaces submarines, it can expand the fleet size by keeping submarines longer in service. D. Mahadzir, ‘Interview: Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, Chief of Staff, Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force’, *Jane’s Navy International*, 26 October 2012, online edition (subscription required).

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 3.39.

There has been a subtle change in this regard: The 2009 White Paper referred to “contingencies involving major power adversaries” in relation to warning and expansion.¹² In the paragraph quoted above, however, the 2013 White Paper focuses on adversary objectives, not whether the adversary is a major or smaller power. Instead, the paragraph that discusses confrontation with a major power now omits mention of either warning or expansion, and simply states that Australia would have to “depend on direct support from allied combat forces”.¹³ This does not mean, however, that self-reliance is irrelevant: Rather, the 2013 White Paper seems to interpret it in a new way.

The Twilight of ‘Self-Reliance’

If something seems so obvious not to need justification, there is often good reason for caution. The 2013 White Paper is the first one that does not provide any justification for ‘self-reliance’. In 2000, the Coalition Government wrote that the ANZUS alliance would be perceived as weaker if Australia developed a “dependency” on the United States,¹⁴ an argument that would not sit well with the cuts to the Australian defence budget of recent years. More commonly, past White Papers have hinted at the strategic reasons that led to the evolution of the concept in the 1960s and 1970s: That Australian and US strategic interests may not always align closely enough that Australia could rely on direct US support in all situations, even if the basic US commitment to Australia’s security was not in doubt.

This is the context in which the repeated reference to Australia’s “unique strategic interests”—albeit not further defined—in the 2009 White Paper’s discussion of self-reliance have to be read.¹⁵ Regarding the direct defence of Australia, these interests historically focused on Indonesia. Force structuring for a conflict with Indonesia is what made it possible to use ‘self-reliance’ to determine how much and what kind of capabilities the ADF should include, and it is in relation to Indonesian contingencies that self-reliance provided a strategy for how Australia could manage serious conflict even if the United States abstained from direct assistance. The 2009 White Paper’s discussion of Indonesia contained all the ambivalence about it as a potential asset and a potential threat that was common to Australian strategic guidance since the West Papua dispute of the 1950s. In the 2013 White Paper, that ambivalence is now gone, and there is no mention of even the possibility of a less than positive relationship with Indonesia.¹⁶ In that

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, para 8.48.

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 3.38

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000*, para 5.14.

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, paras 6.16-17, 6.28.

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, paras 2.32-34, 6.27-30; Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, paras 4.32-33, 11.21-22. There is no equivalent to para 4.33 in the 2013 White Paper.

sense, the 2013 White Paper is the first post-Indonesia guidance document since the early 1950s. With that, however, the original basis for a strategy of 'self-reliance' is also gone, and the White Paper does not discuss any specific instance, or even in general terms, where and why Australia should have to be prepared to use force in a substantial conflict without the involvement of others.

The 2013 White Paper repeats its predecessor's remarks that Australia would have to keep forces in reserve for the defence of Australia against retaliatory attacks, should Australia participate in operations to support stability and security in Asia.¹⁷ And it further links the defence of Australia to regional security: In the past, the words 'self-reliance in Alliance' were useful to distinguish Australia's strategy from self-sufficiency or defence autarky. In contrast, the new phrase of "self-reliance ... within the context of our Alliance with the United States *and our cooperation with regional partners*"¹⁸ rather highlights the disconnect between the traditional interpretation of concept, and Australia's emerging strategic environment.

The 2013 White Paper states that the 'maritime strategy' for a self-reliant defence of Australia would include denying the enemy staging bases in the region—but with a remarkable tolerance for contradiction, it now states that this would "most likely" be undertaken "in partnership with others."¹⁹ The same 'strategy', still discussed under the heading of 'Deter and Defeat Attacks on Australia', now also "aims to ... project power by deploying joint task forces in the Indo-Pacific region and support the operations of regional partners when required", and the White Paper mentions "an active and visible domestic and regional force posture" as necessary for the defence of Australia.²⁰

Whereas 'self-reliance' used to be a strategic concept that implied a specific strategy for managing regional conflict, it is now morphing into a mere statement of Australia's geographic and operational priorities in a wider coalition conflict. Such a statement is still useful, of course, but it is not a strategy for the defence of Australia. Neither is the 'maritime strategy' of the White Paper, because it lays out only a general operational approach, without a coherent explanation of how and why the use of the ADF in that manner would help bring about the government's strategic objectives.

Defence Engagement in Southeast Asia

If the government is moving away from a strategy of self-reliance, what does the White Paper say about operations alongside others? The 2013 White Paper again calls for the ability to make "substantial" contributions to the

¹⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 3.57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, para 3.36. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, para 3.44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, para 3.42, 3.47.

security and stability of the wider Asia/Indo-Pacific, with a particular emphasis on South East Asia. Compared with its predecessor, however, it places greater emphasis on Australian defence engagement, which is now also explicitly considered in Australian defence posture.²¹

Yet, it is quite unclear from the White Paper what strategy Australia seeks to pursue with its regional engagement, let alone how it links to the defence of Australia: It states that “reducing the risk of conflict through building trust and partnerships through regular interaction ... is a vital non-discretionary responsibility”, and that “Australia’s voice will need to be clearer and stronger to be heard”.²² But what does that mean? The White Paper hints at a strategy of common defence against external threats, especially alongside the United States—even to counter “coercion”, not only “aggression”, against Australia’s “partners”.²³ It also hints at a not incompatible, but more indirect and limited strategy of capacity building when it highlights the “very significant investment by Australia in the development of regional defence forces through training and defence cooperation.”²⁴ In what reads like a throw-back to the 1990s literature on ‘common security’, it also proposes “helping to build effective mechanisms to manage regional and transnational security issues and risks arising from rivalries and the possibilities of miscalculation”.²⁵ Then again, Australia may not be that proactive after all, as any “[c]ontributions [to stability and security] would be determined by Government based on consideration of Australia’s direct interests,” and the White Paper is careful not to commit to any specific approach.²⁶ Maybe the increased engagement in Southeast Asia ultimately boils down to Australian support for the “US rebalance [which] provides Australia with new opportunities for cooperation with the United States and regional countries to build regional cooperation and capacity”?²⁷

The problem with the White Paper’s discussion of defence engagement is thus that it does not link activity and desired outcomes through a strategic concept. Discussion of ‘defence influence’ would have been useful here, because this would have raised the questions of whom Australia sought to influence, what actions or situations it sought to influence, how it would have to use the ADF to do so, and what forces would be required—strategic questions that past generations of Australian policymakers, especially in the 1968 and 1971 *Strategic Basis* papers, engaged with in much greater depth

²¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 3.34.

²² *Ibid.*, paras 3.7, 2.11

²³ *Ibid.*, paras 3.54, 3.56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, para 6.2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, paras 6.5, also 6.37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, para 3.54.

²⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 6.11. It is worth noting that the US *Joint Operational Access Concept* sees peacetime cooperation and capacity building as the necessary groundwork for forward operations in major war. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2012), p. 7.

and consideration than this White Paper. For the basic question that the current paper does not address is that as long as Australia is reluctant to enter into any new commitments, to the United States or to regional countries, how much influence can it really expect from its regional engagement?

Renouncing Leadership in the South Pacific?

What about Australian strategy in the South Pacific? The 2000 White Paper had evolved beyond the old 'Defence of Australia' approach of previous decades when it gave the second strategic objective force structure relevance. In 2009, the Rudd Government reinforced the practical implications of this commitment, stating that "Australia will be expected to take a leadership role within the South Pacific if these states are overwhelmed by a natural or man-made crisis". It explicitly mentioned "logistic support, air and sea lift, and strategic communications" that the ADF would have to provide to smaller partners to enable their participation in coalition operations.²⁸ In the 2000 and 2009 White Papers, Australia's strategy to support stability and security was to have an ADF that could lead coalitions to decisively manage regional crises.

In the 2013 White Paper, the Gillard Government now seems to cut back Australia's ambitions in this regard. It finds that Australia has a "central role" in the South Pacific that, for better or for worse, "may well be balanced in the future by the support and assistance provided by other powers".²⁹ There is one reference to Australia playing a "leading role" in the discussion of strategic interest in the region, but when it comes to the principal tasks of the ADF, there is no mention of the ability to lead, as opposed merely to 'cooperate' or "conduct ... military operations with others as required".³⁰ Nor does the White Paper make reference to providing capabilities in the ADF that would enable other countries to participate in coalition operations.

This is thus the first White Paper since 1994 that does not highlight the importance of robust and deep logistics capabilities for stabilization operations in the South Pacific. This matters, because logistics branches are generally less influential within armed forces than combat ones, and cuts to the former are also politically easier, because less immediately obvious, than cuts to the latter. At a time when defence budgets remain under serious pressure, this does not bode well for the ADF's ability to conduct any major operation even in its immediate neighbourhood. The government tells us that "Australia will work closely with regional states and those with an interest in the region",³¹ but it does not require the ADF to be able to lead

²⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, paras 7.11, 6.37.

²⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, paras 2.54-55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, para 3.49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, para 6.54.

and enable coalition operations. Nor however does it make any argument that the need for large-scale operations has diminished, and sticks with the 2006 increase of the Army, whose “regional security imperative”, in Peter Jennings’ words, “seemed more obvious then than now”.³²

Back to the Future with a ‘Credible and Capable’ ADF

Hence, if the government’s defence policy is informed by a coherent strategy for the defence of Australia itself, or for managing threats in the region, there is little indication of that strategy in this White Paper. There is a notion that regional security and stability are becoming more important, and more directly relevant for the defence of Australia, but no guidance on what that might mean for the use, let alone the structure of the ADF. Maybe we should take reassurance from the government’s repeated reference to a ‘credible and capable’ ADF?³³ In their 1991 White Paper, Australia’s Kiwi neighbours sought to develop what ‘credibility’ might mean in practice, and how it could be used to inform force structure development.³⁴ Alas, no such discussion can be found in the 2013 White Paper.

This is not the first Australian strategic guidance document however to make extensive use of this, ultimately meaningless phrase—the 1971 *Strategic Basis* did so too.³⁵ And the parallels do not end there, because then as now, there was profound uncertainty about the future of the region, and a general recognition that a new era was dawning for Australia’s defence strategy. Then as now, vague notions of warning and expansion pervaded strategic guidance. Then as now, defence engagement was recognized as important, but Australia had no clear notion of what it could achieve through it, or how it should do so. Then as now, a cabinet staring at electoral defeat was in no mood to question the strategic phrases of old. Then as now, strategic guidance hinted at new directions, but it was left to new governments to develop a new coherent strategy. In 1973, the government could do so with the controversial, but ultimately correct, judgment of no direct threat for 15 years. The next one, however, will not have it that easy, which makes the lost opportunity of the 2013 White Paper all the more regrettable.

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³² Peter Jennings, ‘Equipment acquisition: surprise from the skies’, ASPIStrategist blog, 13 March 2013, <www.aspistrategist.org.au/equipment-acquisition-surprise-from-the-skies/> [accessed 23 May 2013].

³³ The term appears 11 times in 2013, three times in 2009, and once in 1987.

³⁴ New Zealand Ministry of Defence and New Zealand Defence Force, *The Defence of New Zealand 1991* (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 1991), pp. 30, 39—40, 52, 66-67.

³⁵ Defence Committee, *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy*, 5 March 1971, used the term seven times, in a much shorter document. It is the only *Strategic Basis* paper to do so.