
International Defence Engagement: Potential and Limitations

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The analysis in the 2013 White Paper of international defence engagement highlights the important co-operative activities that Australian Defence Force personnel and Defence officials conduct in, and with, other countries. These activities can create vital synergies for Australia, but their benefits should be neither assumed nor overstated. In particular, they need to be assessed in the broader context of the White Paper's narrative, which is focused primarily on a rationalisation of the gap between the ends and means of defence policy. In that context, the role of Australia's international defence engagement risks being portrayed disproportionately. In the most critical dimension of such engagement, the alliance relationship with the United States, Australia's capacity for burden-sharing and value-adding is diminishing, not expanding. In other forms of international defence engagement, the White Paper's emphases seem designed to compensate for budgetary shortfalls and other deficiencies elsewhere in the policy narrative.

Over recent times, the Australian Government has produced a trilogy of documents on Australia's international engagement and national security interests. In October 2012 the *White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century* was released, followed in 2013 by *A Strategy for Australia's National Security* and the 2013 Defence White Paper. The government views these documents as complementary,¹ and there are important common themes that characterise each document in the trilogy. There is an emphasis on the linkages between Australia's future prosperity and its security, and between Australia's international and domestic policy settings. There is a shared focus on the transformative pace of change in the Indo-Pacific region, and the opportunities and challenges it opens up for Australia. There is also a focus in each of the documents on the shifting balance of wealth and power to, and within, Australia's region. And each also highlights the need for Australian policy to co-ordinate national diplomatic, defence, intelligence, law enforcement, business and people-to-people links in maximising the opportunities and meeting the challenges which 'the Asian century' presents.

There is another characteristic common to each of these documents. It is the failure to match ends with means. There is a reluctance to go beyond declaratory statements of future broad objectives and explain how progress towards those objectives can be achieved in practice through specific domestic reforms, enhanced allocation of resources to priority purposes,

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra, Department of Defence, 2013), para 1.3.

effective outreach and engagement within and beyond the Australian community, and hedging strategies against future contingencies. None of the trilogy documents builds on the foundation of their descriptive analyses to articulate a properly resourced and effectively co-ordinated national plan of action for the short and long term. This deficiency is most apparent in the 2013 Defence White Paper.

Defence Engagement and the Context of the White Paper

Any Australian Defence White Paper, irrespective of the political circumstances in which it is crafted, has the potential to make an important contribution to the national debate on our strategic circumstances, the capabilities needed to meet them and the time-frame for doing so. In this context, the 2013 White Paper makes its own contribution in niche respects rather than in its overall policy coherence. For example, the 'Strategic Outlook' has many elements of common sense. It sets out cogently the challenges that Australian policy faces in the Indian Ocean, in the South Pacific and on a range of particular issues including terrorism and resource constraints as well as technology and cyber security.²

Importantly, it also provides a useful corrective to the mistaken notion that Australia faces some defining strategic choice in its relations with the United States and China.³ The US-China relationship is one characterised by strategic competition as well as co-operation, by interdependent realities as well as independent national capabilities. It is a relationship framed within the context of America's debt and deficits challenges as well as by the rising power and significant fragilities of China. In this context, 'neat' solutions will always be illusory. Strategic options based on containment, or confrontation, or some form of agreed power sharing, or mutually recognised spheres of influence fail to take account adequately of the diversity of interests being pursued by China and the United States. The far more likely future for the US-China relationship is one of uneasy rivalry co-existing with self-interested co-operation and adapting to evolving circumstances. The White Paper captures this strategic reality in a compelling way.

For all its niche merits, however, the White Paper is ultimately unconvincing as a policy document because of its failure to deliver means that match ends, and resources that are required for capabilities. It has been accurately described as a "manifestly underfunded plan".⁴ The rationalisation for this underfunding is built on three critical foundations in the White Paper: its interpretation of Australia's strategic circumstances and outlook; its capability and force structure planning; and its emphasis on international Defence engagement. All three aspects are critically important for Australian

² Ibid., paras 2.42-45, 2.52-57, 2.70-71 and 2.82-90.

³ Ibid., para 2.28.

⁴ Mark Thomson, *The Cost of Defence: ASPI Defence Budget Brief 2013-14* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute 2013), p. viii.

interests. On each of them White Paper adds some important value. But, in the end, its direction-setting in relation to these three areas is tailored to the priority of the broader policy narrative that dominates it.

First, the analysis in the 2013 White Paper of Australia's security environment is mostly deft and astute. But it is too benignly interpreted in the context of the broader policy framework. It identifies key driving forces of strategic change in the Indo-Pacific region such as changing geopolitical relativities among the major powers, military modernisation, resource insecurity, rising nationalism, nuclear brinkmanship and other challenges. It is less insightful, however, in its assessment of the consequences for Australian interests of these dynamics of strategic change. The White Paper is less than forthcoming, for example, on the ways in which the rising regional defence capabilities it describes (or alludes to) could detract from Australia's strategic interests rather than enhance them. That strategic deficit for Australia could result from a diminished technology gap in our weapons systems, new partnerships of security co-operation in our neighbourhood that are contrary to our interests, or new operational doctrines in one or more regional states that challenge the status quo in a destabilising way.

The White Paper refers to "finding the right balance between capability and risk within resources".⁵ It is the resourcing issue, however, which seems disproportionately to frame the management of risk and shape the acquisition of capability. This results in an imbalance rather than 'the right balance'. It is entirely plausible to take the White Paper's strategic analysis and to draw fundamentally different conclusions about its consequences for Australian defence policy to those that the document sets out.

The White Paper describes a range of strategic uncertainties and risks in Australia's region. They include new strategic power relationships in the Indo-Pacific region; the flashpoints on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the East and South China Seas; a range of territorial and maritime disputes; regional military modernisation; instabilities in Pacific Island states; the proliferation of weapons; terrorist activities; the consequences of resource insecurity; and the quest for cyber security. All these and other uncertainties and risks more logically justify, in their own right, a significant increase in the defence budget to fund properly the capabilities that the White Paper espouses. These strategic uncertainties and risks should also more logically generate a far greater sense of urgency in the shaping of Australia's defence priorities than is evident in the document, for which neither appropriate resourcing nor a sense of urgency is a watchword. Furthermore, the extension of Australia's direct strategic focus across an area as expansive and diverse as the 'Indo-Pacific' creates its own additional strategic complexities and resourcing needs.

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 5.9

The White Paper, however, draws a very different conclusion from the strategic analysis it presents. It is one that is more benign and more easily able to rationalise the delays into an indefinite future of capability acquisitions that the White Paper itself endorses. That particular conclusion is flawed.

The White Paper fails at a second level. At the heart of any Defence White Paper is the necessity of choice—particularly choices about capabilities appropriate to the strategic outlook, about the balance between force preparedness, posture and operations, and about levels of overall defence funding.⁶ Of the 660 paragraphs that constitute the 2013 White Paper, only 17 are focused on the defence budget.⁷ That part of the White Paper commits to “increasing Defence funding towards a target of 2 per cent of GDP” but it insists that this is “a long-term objective that will be implemented in an economically responsible manner as and when fiscal circumstances allow”.⁸ In other words, the White Paper makes a choice that Australia’s strategic circumstances and outlook do not currently warrant measures designed to accelerate, in any serious way, progress towards the benchmark it sets for itself. It emphasises that such movement would only be countenanced “when fiscal circumstances allow”.⁹

The 2013-14 Australian Budget, brought down less than two weeks after the White Paper, increased the Defence budget from its post-1938 low in terms of share of GDP in 2012-13. But even on the Budget’s own figures, the Defence share of GDP will remain below 1.7 per cent for the next decade.¹⁰ Furthermore, as events over recent years have shown, the prospect of promised funding being actively delivered is highly vulnerable to the uncertainties of financial projections, to broader fiscal pressures in the national budget and to the all-too-often irresistible temptation to relieve those pressures by significant cuts to Defence.

As a consequence of the strategic conclusions reached in the 2013 White Paper and the resourcing of Defence assets and capabilities that derives from it, the correlation between ends and means is unrealistically protracted and disconcertingly imprecise. The White Paper thus embodies an alignment of strategic guidance, operational planning, engagement, preparedness, capability development and resource allocation that is, at best, forced and artificial. Beyond the artifice, the reality is one of inconsistency and impracticality, with promises of capabilities and assets but quite inadequate resourcing to enable them to be acquired.

⁶ Ibid., para 1.6.

⁷ Ibid., Chapter 7.

⁸ Ibid., para 7.17

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomson, *The Cost of Defence* p. vi.

It is in this context that the contextualisation in the White Paper of Defence's international engagement needs to be analysed. Australia's international defence engagement is not new. As the White Paper points out, this engagement has supported security in our region for many decades.¹¹ It usefully depicts the broad scope of Australian activities encompassed by the term 'international Defence engagement'. Those activities include defence co-operation programs, strategic dialogues, joint training, specialised exchanges, industry partnerships and capacity-building. They involve humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping and involvement in other specific multinational operations. They also embrace the role of 'Defence diplomacy' (particularly through bodies such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum and other groupings) as well as the work of Australian Defence attaches overseas.

Across this broad spectrum of activities, Defence needs to work seamlessly with other Australian departments and agencies and with the wider Australian community. The fact is that building deeper levels of trust and confidence with regional countries is a whole-of-nation responsibility. Defence's international engagement, therefore, needs to be closely co-ordinated with Australia's aid program, our official and public diplomacy, our professional and community links, our business connections, our cultural exchanges, our training and our educational associations and many other interactions. This co-ordination demands particularly close working relations between Defence and other agencies of government, especially the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID and the Australian Federal Police. Such co-ordination was epitomised over recent years in relation to Australian whole-of-government activities in the Solomon Islands and East Timor, and in an earlier phase, on Bougainville.

The White Paper rightly emphasises that building trust and partnerships on defence and security issues is a "non-discretionary responsibility"¹² and that Defence international engagement is "a strategic necessity and a strategic asset".¹³ This is a theme consistently emphasised in the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper and in the *National Security Strategy*. The *Asian Century* White Paper asserts that Australia's regional policy "will be shaped by the broad objective of building trust" involving "deeper understanding, greater transparency, clear communications, more effective and reliable rules and dependable markets". It notes that this building of trust needs to be "across governments and societies", to involve "reliable and practical habits of co-operation" and encompass increased "levels of understanding among people".¹⁴ It also argues that as regional countries modernise their

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 6.2.

¹² *Ibid.*, para 3.7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, para 6.7.

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia in the Asian Century* (Canberra: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2012), p. 229.

defence forces, more opportunities will be created for Australia to build deeper security linkages.¹⁵ The *National Security Strategy* reinforces these emphases by identifying, as one of three key priorities over the next five years in national security policymaking, the goal of “enhanced regional engagement in support of security and prosperity in the Asian century”.¹⁶

The active involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Defence officials in outreach and co-operative activities with Defence organisations in other countries, as well as with multilateral groupings, plays a vital role at many levels. It can deepen understanding of mutual perspectives on the role and use of military force to achieve political and strategic objectives. It can further strengthen alliance relationships and it can expand important common ground with other security partners. It can build vital connections on which to draw in times of crisis and tension. It can reduce the potential for miscalculation and misunderstanding. It can expand the scope for joint initiatives in tactical and strategic areas of interest. It can provide a means for addressing differences and disagreements in a direct way. It can contribute significantly to greater transparency about military budgets and capabilities. And it can facilitate broader dialogue on the global and regional security environment among serving Defence personnel and officials. Over the period ahead, defence international engagement will also be increasingly important for the advancement of Australian strategic interests, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, because “competition for access and influence will be greater, and consideration of Australia’s interests and views less assured”.¹⁷

These are very significant advantages that can accrue from Defence’s international engagement and outreach. However, they need to be seen in perspective. The most important currency of the ADF will always be its capacity to exert hard power, not soft power. Defence diplomacy and international engagement are adjuncts to clear-eyed strategic risk assessment and appropriately calibrated and implemented force structure planning. A focus on the former cannot compensate for deficiencies in relation to the latter. There is no strategic alchemy that can reverse that reality. The relevance of “building defence and military relationships within the region”¹⁸ is not in question. What is questionable is the extent to which the White Paper understates the challenges of effective alliance burden-sharing (particularly with the United States) and overstates the potential benefits for Australian security from more intensive engagement with regional countries.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 230

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security* Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013), p. 37.

¹⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, para 6.4.

¹⁸ Ibid., para 2.12.

The White Paper asserts that military modernisation and rising defence expenditures in the Indo-Pacific region present “significant new opportunities for partnering with other nations’ defence and military organisations”. It also warns that such modernisation and expenditures raise “the levels of capability required by the ADF to maintain the edge that has historically underpinned the defence of our continent with a comparatively small population”.¹⁹ One of the weaknesses of the White Paper is that it exaggerates the significance of “new opportunities” for security partnerships with regional countries at the same time as it fails to address the scale of the challenge of maintaining “the edge” in our defence capabilities.

It is also argued that reduced ADF operations overseas in the period ahead will present new opportunities for Defence engagement and co-operation with partner countries. Those opportunities certainly exist; they are important; and they will be facilitated by funding increases in Defence Co-operation Programs (DCPs), particularly with Papua New Guinea and the wider South Pacific, that were announced in the 2013-14 Budget. The DCPs, however, are a means to an end, not an end in themselves; and that end is to complement the central capabilities and assets of Australia’s defence strategy, not to be some kind of substitute for them. The funding of DCPs also needs to be seen in context. They constitute a relatively small part of the overall Defence budget and this year’s foreshadowed DCP increases are off relatively low bases.

International Defence Engagement: The US Alliance

The 2013 White Paper rightly highlights the alliance relationship with the United States as a focal point for Australian international Defence engagement.²⁰ It addresses the broad spectrum of such engagement including warfighting, training and exercising, intelligence co-operation, capability development, defence technology, space and communications, the joint facilities in Australia, aspects of the US ‘re-balance’ to Asia and high-level dialogues involving Ministers and officials. It focuses, in particular, on new areas of bilateral co-operation opened up by the US strategic ‘rebalance’ to the Asia-Pacific region, by the rotation of US Marines through northern Australia, and by new defence space and communications activities.

All these dimensions of Defence engagement with the United States are fundamentally important for the advancement of Australia’s strategic interests. They need to be further deepened and broadened in the future as the alliance evolves and responds to changing regional and global security developments.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, para 2.46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, paras 6.8-26.

There is an important dimension, however, of Australian Defence engagement with the United States that the 2013 White Paper does not address—namely, the constraints on alliance co-operation that are resulting from the levels of Australian Defence resourcing, and that are set to intensify in the future. As the uncertainties and complexities of the security outlook in the Indo-Pacific region grow, and as the debt and deficit challenges that the United States needs to address become more pressing, American expectations of allies and security partners are increasing. In particular, an old term—‘alliance burden-sharing’—is acquiring a renewed resonance in US policy. What seems clear is that the benchmarks for alliance management on the part of the United States are changing, that burden-sharing will be more carefully assessed and that the value-adding contributions of allies and security partners will be expected to be greater into the future than in the recent past.

Australia’s alliance with the United States is not immune from these changing realities. The 2013 White Paper covers the range of co-operative Defence activities that Australia currently conducts with the United States. Its analysis, in this respect, is limited to being descriptive. It is not forward-looking in the sense of acknowledging the changing American parameters for alliance management and realistically calibrating the capacity of Defence capabilities to be a critical part of Australia’s responsiveness to those changes. The fact is that the scope for meaningful alliance burden-sharing with the United States is diminishing, not expanding, because of Australia’s resource allocation decisions and increasingly niche capabilities.

It is sometimes argued that Australia would contribute more effectively to the US alliance through niche capabilities (such as those directed at discrete irregular threats) rather than through capabilities aimed at the middle to upper end of the operational spectrum. This argument takes inadequate account of the Australian national interest in having an ADF capable of responding to a range of contingencies that may threaten specific Australian interests in different ways at different times. Moreover, it is an argument that is increasingly inconsistent with the requirements of twenty-first century management of the US-Australia alliance. That management cannot effectively be carried out on the cheap nor restricted to a highly selective and narrowly self-serving range of low-level contingencies.

The White Paper asserts that

Australia’s defence policy is founded on the principle of self-reliance in deterring or defeating armed attacks on Australia within the context of our Alliance with the United States and our cooperation with regional partners.²¹

²¹ Ibid., para 3.36.

The reality, however, is that Australian defence “self-reliance” in this context is becoming worryingly minimalist. Different parts of the White Paper appear to go in different directions. One part states that Australia

would seek and expect help from our friends if Australia came under direct attack. But we should not rely on the combat forces of others to defend Australia.²²

Another part notes that

if Australia were threatened by a major power with military capabilities beyond our capacity to deter or defend, we would depend on direct support from allied combat forces.²³

The White Paper asserts that it is “realistic about the limits to self-reliance”.²⁴ The way in which this realism is conveyed, however, reflects either fuzzy thinking or lack of clarity in its explanation, or both. Invocations of “self-reliance” are easy to make but hard to reflect in practice. Definitions can become narrowly self-serving. There is the real risk of a dangerous spiral into hollow nationalism in which proud assertions of the scope of Australian self-reliance are made but in which the resource allocations to back them up are missing. That risk comes closer with the 2013 White Paper.

Australia’s alliance relationship with the United States is the single most important element of our international Defence engagement. It is, therefore, a lost opportunity for the White Paper to limit itself to a general description of past and current forms of that bilateral engagement, and not to address the implications for the alliance of America’s rising expectations and the realistic capacity for Australian Defence assets to respond appropriately.

International Defence Engagement: Major Regional Powers

The assessment in the White Paper of Australia’s Defence engagement with Japan²⁵ is similarly limited to a description of the status quo, and similarly silent in terms of realities that constrain future engagement. Australia’s security ties with Japan have developed significantly and highly productively for both countries over the past decade. This is reflected in the extent of strategic dialogues, diplomatic co-operation and practical joint defence activities. It is also reflected in trilateral exchanges involving the United States. This broadening scope of Australia-Japan defence engagement has been an important bilateral and regional development which needs to be further consolidated over coming years. It would have been useful for the White Paper to give some sense of the ways in which that consolidation is being planned and other options that are worth exploring. It would also have

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., para 3.38.

²⁴ Ibid., para 3.37.

²⁵ Ibid., paras 6.39-42.

been realistic for the document to encompass the practical limitations on the scope of such future bilateral co-operation including domestic political and constitutional realities in Japan, the priorities for Japan's national security policymaking under the Abe Government, relevant implications for Australia's relationships with the United States and China, and the views of Australia's regional neighbours on any expanding agenda for Australia-Japan security co-operation.

The 2013 White Paper puts Australia's Defence engagement with China firmly in the context of the bilateral 'strategic partnership' that Prime Minister Gillard announced during her April 2013 visit to Beijing.²⁶ There is a commitment to "developing strong and positive defence relations with China through dialogue and appropriate practical activities",²⁷ and in particular through the Australia-China Defence Engagement Action Plan.²⁸ Closer security linkages within China have important potential for Australian interests in terms of political and professional linkages, insights into strategic doctrines and threat perceptions, and joint training activities. But the constraints are equally real. They are constraints that are a product of China's strategic priorities derived from its historical experience, its contemporary interests and its future aspirations. There are also constraints resulting from Australia's own broader regional and global interests, China's lack of transparency on military issues, its strategies for enhanced regional and global influence, and the priorities of Australia's alliance relationship with the United States. In addition, there is also the potential constraint of China's own perceptions of Australia's emphasis on international (and particularly Indo-Pacific) defence co-operation. China may need to be reassured that this is not part of a longer-term hedging strategy against China itself, and China's own responsiveness to that engagement may therefore depend on the reassurances it receives.

The White Paper addresses specifically the importance of Australia's defence engagement with India.²⁹ It focuses on the vital shared strategic interests we have in open sea lines of communication (particularly in the Indian Ocean). What is lacking, however, is both a future agenda for taking this bilateral engagement forward and a strategy for addressing constraints on it that include India's priority focus on developments in South Asia.

Other Bilateral and Multilateral Partnerships

The 2013 White Paper rightly emphasises that "Australia's strong partnership with Indonesia remains our most important strategic relationship"³⁰ and that it is "our most important defence relationship in the

²⁶ Ibid., para 6.43.

²⁷ Ibid., para 6.44.

²⁸ Ibid., para 6.47.

²⁹ Ibid., paras 6.66-68.

³⁰ Ibid., para 2.32.

region”.³¹ It highlights the foundation of Australia-Indonesia defence co-operation provided by the 2012 Defence Cooperation Arrangement and the 2006 Lombok Treaty, and it points to the practical program of military, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief co-operation pursued within those frameworks.

Indonesia is a critical security and diplomatic partner for Australia, and its significance will only grow. However, in terms of a fully-fledged bilateral defence partnership, that adds real weight in terms of interoperability, shared strategic doctrines and common strategic objectives, the aspirations outlined in very general terms in the White Paper are a long-term prospect at best, more than a short or even medium-term one. As progress is hopefully made to that long-term prospect, there are a range of mutually beneficial outcomes that will be derived. But progress is likely to be incremental and subject to uncertainties in the broader bilateral relationship.

The White Paper also outlines a range of past and current Defence engagement activities with regional countries—Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia and Laos, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and the Pacific Island states.³² These are all important security relationships but with varying levels of intensity and (for different reasons) with limited scope for decisive expansion, in the short-term at least.

The focus on the South Pacific is particularly relevant given Australia’s ongoing responsibilities and involvement in the region, and in the context of the new opportunities for Defence engagement there (particularly in relation to regional confidence-building initiatives as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations) which will be opened up by Australia’s acquisition of assets such as large amphibious vessels. Such engagement will enhance the potential for Australian defence diplomacy in the South Pacific to play an expanding regional role. Even in this particular theatre of operations, however, the capacities foreshadowed elsewhere in the White Paper create their own constraints on Australia’s engagement with Pacific Island countries. There is a lack of correlation between the stabilisation role to which the White Paper aspires,³³ and the availability of Defence and other personnel (particularly if more than one South Pacific contingency occurs at the same time).

In addition, the White Paper also provides details on Australia’s defence engagement with countries beyond our immediate neighbourhood such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, Spain and Canada, and with multilateral groupings such as the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN Regional

³¹ *Ibid.*, para 6.28.

³² *Ibid.*, paras 6.31-36, 6.48-63.

³³ *Ibid.*, para 3.13-14.

Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus meeting, the EU, NATO and the United Nations.³⁴ The scope of this extensive analysis reflects the increased emphasis it seeks to give to international Defence engagement across the board. However, for all the intensity of that focus, the emphasis in the White Paper is far more on a description of past and contemporary circumstances than it is on the future. It raises expectations about future international engagement but sheds little light on how those expectations will be realised in practice, and how specific constraints are going to be addressed.

Conclusion

Australia's international defence engagement is an important part of any coherent defence policy. It has been in the past, and the White Paper is right to focus on it. But the broader policy context in which it is set is critical. International defence engagement only works most effectively for Australia when it complements a broader defence policy based on a realistic assessment of strategic risk, a clear set of national defence objectives, a range of capabilities to advance them and a commitment of funds, short-term and longer-term, to enable such an outcome. The aspirations in the White Paper for Australia's international defence engagement will continue to be elusive until these pre-conditions are met.

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³⁴ Ibid., paras 6.69-70, 6.74-76, 6.37, 6.78-82.