

## Balancing Australia's Strategic Commitments

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Power is a relative concept. Hence describing Australia as a 'middle power' is unhelpful. A viable national security strategy needs to discard such loose generalities and recognise the divergent political and strategic implications of Australia's commitments in stabilizing the South Pacific, reinforcing South East Asia, and using the ADF for political influence globally. To debate the merits of an 'expeditionary' as opposed to 'continental defence' posture is to overlook the fundamentally divergent implications for Australian defence capability of these three types of overseas commitments. In the absence of a framework of clear priorities and realistic matching of commitments to resources, Australian defence policy runs the danger of becoming based on bluff rather than military power.

In recent years, the Australian national security agenda has encompassed an ever-widening range of issues. For example, this volume includes articles on domestic criminal law and counterterrorism or health security and pandemic influenza that would probably not have featured in a similar edition ten years ago. The reference to a Defence focus on security in both the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East found in the 2007 *Defence Update*<sup>1</sup> would not have been imaginable even ten years ago. And as security challenges of various types have increased, so have the capabilities of Australia's wider security community, as several articles in this volume have discussed.

However, simply adding new issues to an already crowded agenda does not amount to a national security strategy, nor is it a way to determine priorities.<sup>2</sup> In the defence context, the *Defence 2000 White Paper* attempted to set priorities by linking force structure and long-term capability decisions to the defence of Australia, while guiding readiness and force employment issues through the hierarchy of five concentric circles, from the defence of Australia to global operations.<sup>3</sup> However, this structure proved too rigid to accommodate the consequences of later events in the Middle East, and the framework has largely fallen by the wayside in recent years. The latest *Update* acknowledges that "difficult choices have to be made about the priorities we set for our military forces", and that

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wylie, 'National Security: Time for Strategic Thinking?', *National Security Magazine*, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, pp. 29-32.

It is vital to have a clear defence policy framework that guides decisions about developing the ADF's capabilities and helps us to judge when, where and how we might use our military power.<sup>4</sup>

So far, however, no such framework has emerged, and Defence has made a virtue of necessity by declaring that recent ad-hoc capability decisions were a sign of “flexibility, and determination, in decision-making”, and that these were “a necessary part of responding to strategic change and managing our defence posture responsibly.”<sup>5</sup>

This article argues that priority needs to be given to establishing a framework for setting priorities, on the basis of two considerations: First, a realistic appreciation of Australia's relative power that goes beyond the view of Australia as a ‘middle power’, popular with politicians and commentators alike.<sup>6</sup> Second, a more explicit consideration of commitments, rather than interests, as the basis for Australian defence activity.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Relativity of Australian Power**

If UN members were ranked in terms of power, Australia would probably appear somewhere ‘in the middle’. But power—however defined—is always a relative concept.<sup>8</sup> This is especially so in the areas of national security and defence, which deal with the reality or possibility of adversarial relationships and conflict. Hence what really matters is Australia's power relative to individual allies, friends, neighbours or foes. The following discussion, along with Figures 1 to 5, show how Australia compares to a number of other countries around the world and in the region on two measures, population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (and their combination as GDP per capita), which lie at the root of national power in the ‘hard’ form that is most relevant for defence decisions.

Australia is obviously not one of the major powers such as the United States, China or India—see Figure 1—which will determine, for better or for worse, the overall shape of the international system in which Australia will operate in the future. In Coral Bell's words, Australia has to learn to ‘live with giants’,<sup>9</sup> which makes it all the more important to gain a clear appreciation of its standing in the region and the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

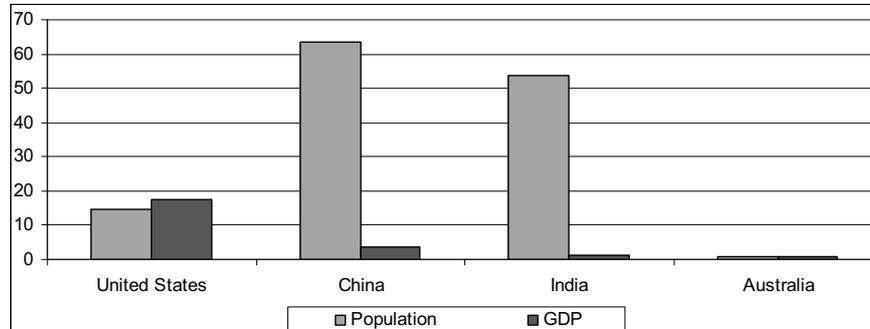
<sup>6</sup> Greg Sheridan, for example, recently wrote that “Australia is a strong middle power with global defence and security interests that it is prepared to back with military force.” Greg Sheridan, ‘Defence of our realm,’ *The Australian*, 7 July 2007, <[http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/gregsheridan/index.php/theaustralian/comments/defence\\_of\\_our\\_realm/](http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/gregsheridan/index.php/theaustralian/comments/defence_of_our_realm/)> [Accessed 9 July 2007].

<sup>7</sup> The author would like to thank Bob Wylie and two anonymous reviewers for invaluable comments on an earlier version of this article.

<sup>8</sup> David Jablonsky, ‘National Power,’ *Parameters*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 34-54.

<sup>9</sup> Coral Bell: *Living with Giants: Finding Australia's Place in a More Complex World*, Canberra, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2005.

Figure 1: Australia and the Major Powers



Note: All data in Figures 1 to 5 is standardized to Australia = 1. All figures for 2006. GDP is measured in US\$ at market values. Absolute values for Australia in 2006 are: Population 20.395.000, GDP 754.816 billion US\$, GDP per capita 36.553 US\$. Source: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, April 2007, <<http://www.imf.org/external/data.htm>> [Accessed 9 July 2007]. Calculations by author.

Figure 2: Australia Among US Allies

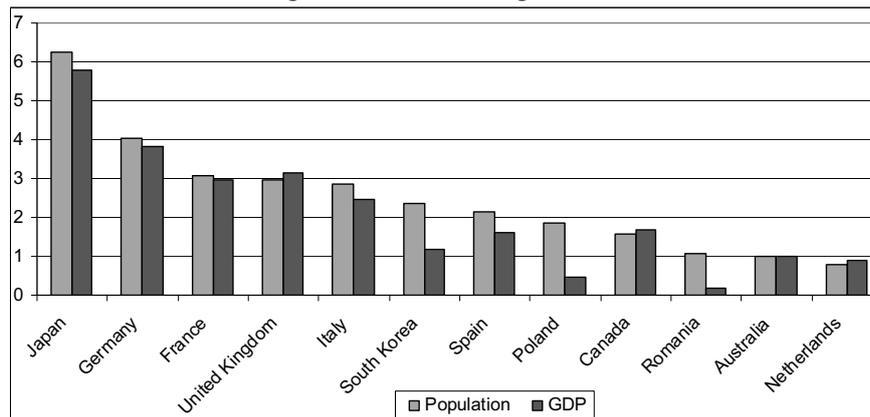
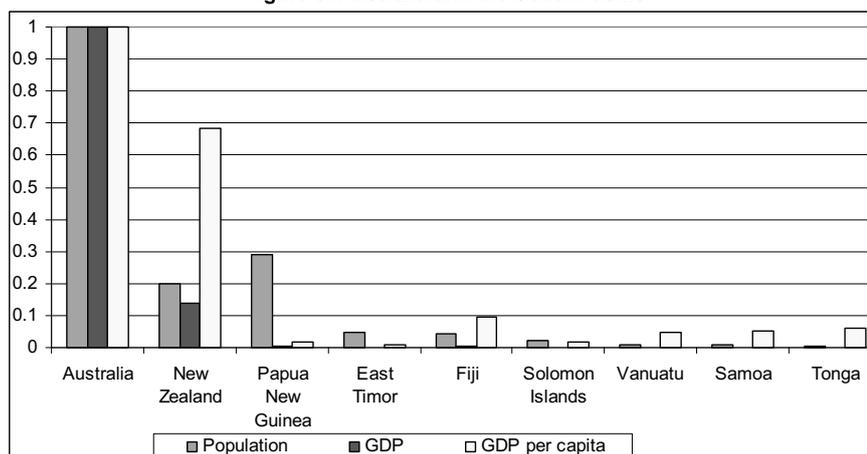


Figure 2 shows Australia's position relative to a number of US allies within and outside the NATO alliance. Australia ranks alongside the Netherlands and Romania using the broad indicators of population and GDP (with regards to the former). The picture is much the same if military expenditure and capability are compared: The Pentagon's 2003 *Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense*, shows, for example, that Australia only contributes 1.23% of the allies' defence spending, and merely 0.56% of ground-, 1.59% of naval-, and 1.36% of air-combat capability.<sup>10</sup> As far as the global community of US allies is concerned, Australia's importance from a

<sup>10</sup> Secretary of Defense, *Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense*, Washington DC, Department of Defense, 2003, pp. C-2, C-3.

material point of view is far from outstanding—a position that is unlikely to change as continental European NATO members continue to make their Cold-War forces more expeditionary.

Figure 3: Australia and the South Pacific



Australia is however operating in a completely different universe as far as the South Pacific and East Timor are concerned (Figure 3). Towering above all other states in the region, including New Zealand, in terms of population, GDP, military capability and any other measure of power, it is a regional superpower of sorts. While Australia certainly does not always get its way, especially when it becomes involved in the day-to-day running of states in the region, only Australia has the economic resources and military capabilities to decisively influence developments in the region through carrots and sticks—if it decides to do so. And only Australia has such a clear margin of superiority that it can quell or assuage rivalries and conflicts among states in the region, or to provide the necessary political, financial and managerial capital that can make regional cooperation succeed.

But compared to its Asian neighbours, Australia is at the same time a dwarf (in terms of population) and a giant (in terms of GDP) (Figures 4 and 5). These relativities are highly sensitive to even relatively small changes in the region's per capita GDPs, which will erode Australia's absolute advantage over the medium to longer term. In the capital-intensive business of national security and defence, especially in an archipelagic environment, this means that Australia is still punching far above its weight in population terms: The capability edge has been a longstanding principle of Australian defence policy, but so has the pressure that growing regional capabilities have placed on it.

Compared with the South Pacific and East Timor, Australia is clearly more constrained in the way it can exercise power in island South East Asia and further to the north. Demographics preclude a decisive role for the Australian Army in an Asian land war. But in terms of the capital-intensive tools of national security—be it ships, aircraft, or highly educated and well-equipped teams of police specialists—Australia can deploy capabilities that are far beyond those of any other regional state, bar Singapore. Conceiving of Australia as a ‘middle power’ in South East Asia is thus not helpful either: On the one hand, such a view understates the importance of the contribution that Australia can make to regional security and stability. On the other hand, it overstates the durability of Australia’s capability edge sustained by a relatively ephemeral difference in per capita GDP.

Figure 4: Australia the Asian Dwarf

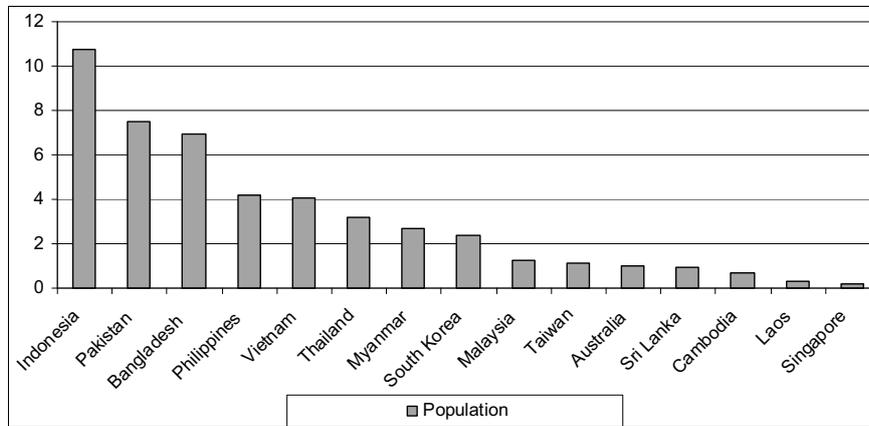
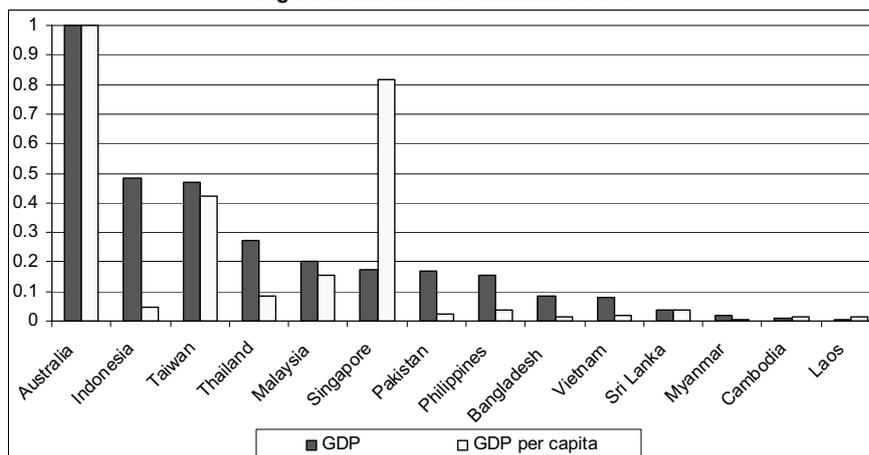


Figure 5: Australia as an Asian Power



## **Foreign Interests vs Foreign Commitments**

Seeing Australia as a middle power thus illustrates the dangers of thinking in terms of averages, rather than the country's strategic situation. In the South Pacific, it is far more. Globally, it is far less. In Asia, it is both more and less than a middle power. Recent Australian defence debates have downplayed the strategic significance of Australia's geography. But, unlike other countries of comparable size, such as the Netherlands or Romania, geography requires Australia to have at least three, rather than one, strategic 'personalities' to address its global, South East Asian, and South Pacific roles. Relative power relations dictate that each of these roles will have different operational, capability and strategic implications. The main challenge for a future government will lie in managing the opportunity costs of concentrating on, or disregarding, any of these roles.

This does not mean, of course, that the Australian national security commitments at home are insignificant. Even the most ardent critics of 'Defence of Australia' would not argue that Australia should not strive for the capability to defend itself against any direct violation of its territorial sovereignty or integrity—in war, but also short of war. As Sam Bateman discusses in this edition, much remains to be done here. James Renwick demonstrates that terrorism on Australian soil, be it committed by Australian citizens or foreigners, raises questions about limits to the government's powers that Australia—unlike a number of European countries—has not had to confront in this way before. Similarly, Christian Enemark shows how the relatively new area of health security raises a number of organisational and, in particular, ethical questions that are unfamiliar to the wider national security community.

In all these areas, however, it is widely understood and accepted that governments are responsible for addressing them. Ultimately, such responsibilities directly derive from the social contract and corresponding duty of care on which a democratic system is based. This eliminates a main layer of complexity compared with the more contentious national security tasks, which relate to Australian 'interests' lying outside the scope of its territorial boundaries.

Of course Australia has global interests. But in rediscovering Australia's global interests, the current Australian strategic debate seems to have lost sight of two fundamentals that used to be well understood in previous years:

Firstly, some interests are more important than others. In particular, it is worth reserving the adjective 'vital' for those interests whose violation would directly threaten or eliminate a state's ability to ensure its territorial integrity and survival. Australia thus has two vital interests—the prevention of a lodgement of forces of a hostile major power in the islands to Australia's north, and the prevention of a global nuclear war. These eventualities dwarf

the potential damage wrought by terrorism, even if it involved weapons of mass destruction,

Secondly, even if an interest is vital, it does not follow that a country can or should make that interest the focus of its defence effort. No country is all powerful, and it is a brutal fact of life that it is beyond the abilities of many countries to ensure their vital interests—or, as the Athenians told the Melians, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>11</sup> Luckily for Australia, geography has so far prevented it from falling into a Melian dilemma. But it is worth remembering that a global nuclear exchange may well have threatened Australia’s survival as a nation during the Cold War—especially if considerations of broken-backed warfare entered Soviet targeting calculations. However, after the early 1950s the country never made a contribution to the central Cold War strategic balance a focus of its defence effort.<sup>12</sup>

This suggests that it is not foreign *interests* that matter, but foreign *commitments*—paraphrasing Walter Lippmann, defined as: “an obligation, outside the continental limits of [Australia], which may in the last analysis have to be met by waging war.”<sup>13</sup> Commitments obviously follow interests. But the limits to Australia’s power mean that foreign commitments must reflect the order of priority between interests, and the extent and way in which Australia thinks it can actually influence events that may threaten these interests. In other words, interests are set (albeit sometimes value-laden) and aspirational, while commitments are chosen and instrumental. Foreign commitments, not interests, are the essence of strategy. It is, therefore, indispensable to look in closer detail at Australia’s foreign commitments, in the context of Australia’s relative power as outlined above.

### **Stabilizing the South Pacific and East Timor**

According to the *Defence Update 2007*, Australia has “a lasting commitment to help build stability and prosperity” in the South Pacific and East Timor.<sup>14</sup> Over the last year, Australian forces have been deployed in or near East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga. But Australia’s national security

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<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book Five, para. 58, transl. by Richard Crawley; Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides*, New York, Touchstone, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Thompson, ‘Defence Down Under: Evolution and Revolution 1971-1988,’ *Working Paper*, no. 40, London, Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London, 1988, pp. 1-3. Australia did, however, contribute through the US joint facilities on its soil, and conducted maritime surveillance operations against Soviet forces in its area of strategic interest—in particular in the South Pacific and from 1980 onwards with P-3C Orion aircraft operating out of Butterworth in Malaysia. David Horner, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Vol. IV: Making the Australian Defence Force*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1943, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia’s National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, p. 19.

commitments in the South Pacific require a whole-of-government approach that extends beyond the use of military force, in a way that has no parallel in any other of the country's other commitments.

However, whether the activity of the past years has helped to put the region on a more sustainable footing remains to be seen. In his article in this edition, John McFarlane argues that the current level of involvement already strains the Australian Federal Police (AFP) close to breaking point, despite a considerable increase in resources. Defence has decided to increase the strength of the Australian Army by one, or perhaps two, battalions to deal with the manpower intensive and lengthy nature of intervention operations—an undertaking that will require significant additional funding to succeed. But as Ross Babbage suggests, perhaps a whole 'Peace Corps' of civilian experts must also be developed as a new tool to bolster and sustain Australian engagement in the region over the long term. Quite likely, additional measures in, for example, the trade, education and immigration fields will also be required.

Australia's commitment to the South Pacific thus requires expensive non-military 'tools' that are of limited utility in other areas of national security concern. This is a particular problem for Australia because regional instability here does not threaten states outside the region. Cooperation with regional states is of course essential, not the least due to the cultural knowledge required. But while New Zealand can make substantial contributions, it is clear that Australia must do most of the heavy lifting in economic, military, police, and development terms. And whether the current rate of effort can make a substantial difference even if sustained over a generation remains to be seen—a much greater Australian effort in political, defence, economic, and development terms may well be required.

### **Reinforcing South East Asia**

The joint Australian-Indonesian hunt for the leaders of Jemaah Islamiya illustrates how countries in South East Asia require security support particularly in the area of counterterrorism. But ASEAN members are relatively stable, and other outside countries, particularly the United States, are also engaged in a similar role to Australia because their own interests are involved. The overall resource implications of that engagement for Australia are thus not only less than in the South Pacific, but success is also less directly dependent on the scale of Australian efforts. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from the scale of that counter-terrorism effort to the scale of Australia's defence commitment to the region.

That said, preventing a hostile power from controlling a major island to the north is one of the few truly vital Australian interests. This means that, firstly, Indonesia's future policies as the dominant power within ASEAN are of abiding concern to Australia, and, secondly, that the integrity and resilience

of ASEAN countries against outside pressure is of similar importance. In this context, the *Defence Update 2007* contains language on China's military modernization and regional aspirations that is sterner than that in its predecessors. Yet, the consequences that might flow from China's policies for Australia's strategic commitment to South East Asia are rarely spelled out.

Territorial disputes between ASEAN members and China in the South China Sea have calmed since the mid-1990s, but are yet to be resolved. But this is not the only possible cause of conflict in the region. It is quite likely that the most profound impact on Australia of great power conflict between the United States, Japan and China—whether it escalates to war or not—would not flow from the ANZUS treaty, but from its effect on Australia's commitment to South East Asia. For example, China's transformation of Myanmar into a de-facto client state, including the construction of naval facilities on the Indian Ocean<sup>15</sup> enables it to exert latent pressure on sea lines of communication through South East Asia that carry most of Japan's energy supply. Should great power relations in North Asia deteriorate, ASEAN countries can expect to come under severe Chinese pressure at a time that Japan and the United States will focus their attention on the primary theatre in North Asia. Given that such a situation would put significant pressure on the United States to define its vital interests in Asia, it is worth remembering that the US reluctance to support Australia over Irian Jaya in 1962 was already

a chastening if salutary lesson that the United States did not see the world as Australia saw it, did not wholly share our concept of vital, or even important, national interests<sup>16</sup>

or that, as the Athenians told the Melians hoping for Spartan intervention, "[g]oodwill shown by the party that is asking for help does not mean security for the prospective ally."<sup>17</sup>

The *Defence 2000* White Paper was fairly clear about the commitment to South East Asia, writing that Australia's "key strategic interest is to maintain a resilient regional community that can cooperate to prevent the intrusion of potentially hostile external powers",<sup>18</sup> and that the country "would want to be in a position, ... to help our neighbours defend themselves"<sup>19</sup> against external aggression. The two subsequent Defence Updates did not mention

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<sup>15</sup> David Walgreen, 'China in the Indian Ocean Region: Lessons in PRC Grand Strategy,' *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 55-73.

<sup>16</sup> T.B. Millar, 'Australian Defence, 1945-1965,' in Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (eds), *Australia in World Affairs 1961-1965*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, 1968, p. 283. See also Ross Cottrill's article in this edition.

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book Five, para. 105-109, transl. by Rex Warner, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

this commitment while the *Defence Update 2007* only makes veiled references that do not clearly distinguish between Australian engagement in the South Pacific and South East Asia.<sup>20</sup>

This is unfortunate since force structure implications for the ADF—to say nothing of the implications for the national security community as a whole—are quite different between both commitments. Hard combat power provided by combat aircraft, submarines and major surface combatants is the Australian instrument with which the country's commitment in the South East Asian archipelago would have to be met. Maritime geography, demographic realities, and regional capabilities mean that the Army would be of relatively little relevance, especially since the 2000 White Paper made it clear that Australia would act “only at the request of a neighbouring government, and would expect to be able to operate from bases in its territory.”<sup>21</sup>

Since South East Asia involves the only vital interest that Australia can actually do something about on its own, other than its direct defence, it is the country's only true foreign commitment of necessity, not choice. Rarely acknowledged in public and seemingly far removed from everyday concern, it is no less real than the American commitment to the survival of Western democracies in Europe before the Second World War. That commitment was also only widely recognized after the fall of France.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, however, there are no British Isles to Australia's North. The commitment to South East Asia is, indeed, the elephant in the room of today's Australian defence debate.

### Using the ADF for Political Influence

There can be no doubt that a certain propensity to participate in overseas wars fought by its two traditional allies, the United Kingdom and the United States, is part of Australian national strategic culture. In addition, a belief in the universal validity of democratic values provides a strong impetus for global, including military, engagement. During the Second World War, seven million Australians sent three divisions to the Middle East—but even then, Australian numbers (and those of their enemies) in the Mediterranean paled into insignificance compared to those on the war-deciding Eastern front. Throughout its history, Australia's global commitments were thus determined by political considerations aimed at influencing allies' behaviour, rather than regarding the exercise of power—including during the era of 'Forward Defence', when Australia tried to bind major allies to the region.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, pp. 26-27, 31-32.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Lippmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>23</sup> Robert O'Neill, 'Diplomacy and Defence,' *Reference Paper*, no. 51, Canberra, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1979, esp. pp. 1-8.

The 1976 White Paper summarized the consequences of global geography and demographics by stating that “[e]vents in distant areas such as Africa, the Middle East and North East Asia ... are beyond the reach of effective defence activity by Australia”.<sup>24</sup> But even the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper, widely dismissed by some for organising the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for operations in and from Northern Australia, explicitly mentions that forces could be made available for international coalition operations if warranted.<sup>25</sup> However, it has been a central tenet of Australian defence policy for the last thirty years that such options are a consequence of good force structuring decisions for independent ADF operations, not, in themselves, a driver of force structure decisions. Yet that tenet is no natural law, and the question is whether and to what extent it may be altered in the future.

The recent 2007 *Defence Update* writes that Australia has committed “substantial Defence resources” to the Middle East, including “significant combat forces”.<sup>26</sup> This language blurs the hierarchy of Australian ambitions established in the 2000 White Paper,<sup>27</sup> but clearly points to an increased priority of operations in more far-flung theatres. Yet, while deployments to the Middle East may be significant in terms of their implications for the ADF, they are anything but in the strictly military sense. Australian forces in Afghanistan and Iraq still serve Australian national interests through the political statement of support they send to those countries that do the heavy lifting—first and foremost the United States, but also a number of NATO countries in Afghanistan that are both bigger than Australia, and do not have other pressing security concerns in their benign neighbourhood at home.

Although Australia cannot decide the outcome of an overseas campaign or operation in the way it can in its neighbourhood, tailoring forces for political commitments nevertheless would lead to distinct capability implications that differ from those of the commitments to stabilize the South Pacific, and reinforce South East Asia. In fact, if the future government decides to make global commitments the main focus of its defence policy, it could do much worse than compare notes with its trans-Tasman partner, whose 1991 *Defence of New Zealand* White Paper established the concept of the ‘credible minimum force’ to do just that.<sup>28</sup> In general, interoperability with allied partner services would become more important than interoperability

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<sup>24</sup> Department of Defence, *Australian Defence*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 1976, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 1987, p. 3. Explicitly mentioned in this context was the possibility of using the RAN’s FFGs as part of US carrier battle groups.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia’s National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, pp. 33, 27.

<sup>27</sup> That document had reserved the terms ‘substantial’ and ‘significant’ for Australian contributions to coalition operations in South East Asia and North Asia, respectively. Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Defence and New Zealand Defence Force, *The Defence of New Zealand 1991*, Wellington, New Zealand Government, 1991.

within the ADF. As Australia slots its units into forces much larger than its own, it could maximize possibilities for participation and international publicity by keeping a small number of many different capabilities and platforms in its force structure, and there would be no penalty if the ADF did not make up a coherent whole. In particular, the justification of new capabilities could rest on purely tactical grounds, rather than broader considerations of when and how to exercise Australian national military power.<sup>29</sup>

### Commitments and Coherent Force Planning

As Michael Fitzsimmons points out, it is especially important to maintain analytical rigour and transparency if uncertainty is judged to be high. A general belief in the prevalence of strategic uncertainty can otherwise encourage decisionmakers to reject any analysis based on available information, and thus increase rather than decrease the influence of rigid preconceptions.<sup>30</sup> While there is little doubt that Australia's strategic environment has become more uncertain since the days of the 1987 White Paper, the Australian defence debate of recent years has often been framed in terms of a 'continentalist' school focused on air and maritime capabilities locked in opposition with an 'expeditionary' one that sees a much larger role for the Army.<sup>31</sup> But not only is it debatable whether that characterization is in fact correct, conceiving of a defence posture without explicit reference to the three types of Australian foreign commitment discussed above also comes perilously close to demonstrating the dangers that Fitzsimmons warned about.

Prime Minister John Howard's government has reacted to global and regional challenges by significantly expanding Australia's national security ambitions and resources. Interventions in the South Pacific have provided important precedents and experiences on a national and institutional level. ADF, AFP and intelligence organizations have seen their budgets and manpower significantly expanded. So far, government and the ADF are confident that they will be able to afford recent additions to the force structure, as well as new air and naval capabilities and additional Army troops to sustain the South East Asian and South Pacific commitments, respectively. The three types of Australian commitment discussed above are thus largely a reformulation of current policy and guidance. However, conceiving of the purpose of Australian defence and national security policy

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<sup>29</sup> The debate on the merits of the two LHDs over alternative amphibious ship designs, as well as on the merit of procuring the Abrams tank, has shown many signs of such an argumentation. Bruce McLennan and Gregory P. Gilbert, 'Amphibious Ships—Bigger is Better', *Quadrant*, vol. 50, no. 9 (September 2006), pp. 52-59; Paul Monk, 'Revolution in Defence,' *AFR*, 8 July 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, 'The Problem of Uncertainty in Strategic Planning,' *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 4 (Winter 2006-07), esp. pp. 131-136.

<sup>31</sup> Christian Hirst, 'The paradigm shift: 11 September and Australia's strategic reformation', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 61, no. 2 (June 2007), pp. 175-192.

in this way makes it easier to discuss the necessary trade-offs in capability and wider resource terms that are inevitable if the ADF and security community are to be able to fulfil several roles.

In this context, it is vitally important to be clear about why a particular capability is procured in the first place, and to distinguish that reasoning from the various ways in which it could otherwise be usefully employed once it has joined the ADF—uses that may be much more likely than the reason for which it is part of the force structure in the first place.<sup>32</sup> Given limited resources and a broad spectrum of missions, it is a natural reaction to strive for ‘versatile’ national security instruments in general, and military forces in particular.<sup>33</sup> Many of the capabilities recently procured by the ADF—such as the Abrams tanks, LHDs,<sup>34</sup> or C-17 transport aircraft—would have some utility in a relatively large number of scenarios.

But in the South Pacific, the priority in terms of military forces is for a capability to provide a long-term, dispersed presence on the ground to prevent or limit political violence, and to assist in capability building of local national security agencies.<sup>35</sup> Achieving more than short-term stabilization in the South Pacific requires civil-military teams with in-country experience and supporting economic, educational and aid policies, tools that are of limited use outside that region. Similarly, it is true that a role would certainly be found for most ADF capabilities if Australia was to reinforce South East Asia. However, local geography and regional capabilities would mean that if Australia is to have a decisive influence on the outcome of a regional war, the priority would lie on air and naval forces, rather than land force capabilities.<sup>36</sup>

### **Balancing Commitments: A Difficult Task for the Next Government**

In the light of regional commitments in which Australia has to carry strategic weight and do the heavy lifting, some of the ADF’s recent acquisitions are thus optional, rather than essential, force structure elements. If the ADF is to be used for more than demonstrating political support, ‘expeditionary’

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<sup>32</sup> Such a distinction is nothing new in the Australian context. For example, the Leopard tanks remained in the force structure in the 1987 White Paper concept because of their role as part of the expansion base, yet their most likely employment would have been in the defence of the Darwin-Tindal area.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia’s National Security: A Defence Update 2005*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> Landing Ship Helicopter / Dock.

<sup>35</sup> It is, of course, possible to imagine situations in which large-scale (in regional terms) amphibious landings and combined arms operations would have a role to play even in the South Pacific. However, given local jungle geography, regional capabilities and the demands of sustaining ongoing operations, procuring main battle tanks or LHDs (rather than a larger number of vessels similar to New Zealand’s new HMNZS *Canterbury*) would unlikely to have been a priority for meeting the South Pacific commitment alone.

<sup>36</sup> After all, Australian deployments to the region during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam war signalled support to British and American efforts, rather than aim to make a decisive influence on the course of the war as a whole.

capabilities are much less fungible than they are often made out to be. The main Australian national security challenge in the future will thus be to reconcile the demands of different commitments in a way that each of them can still be satisfied.

Australia needs new National Security and Defence White Papers that define priorities both within and between the agencies and departments relevant for national security. Without them, Australia's commitments still outpace its capability. And there is a real danger that Australia's ability to deal with those situations in which it has to achieve military rather than indirect political effect is not keeping up with regional developments. It is not at all clear that Australia's current level of effort is sufficient to achieve its goals in the South Pacific. At the same time, some advocates of using the ADF for political demonstrations rather than military effect propose to fund additional bits of new capability by cutting the number of future Joint Strike Fighters.<sup>37</sup> Yet, because these are primarily important in a South East Asian commitment where Australia does not want to rely on great power assistance, such a trade-off significantly reduces the options available to government, or makes defeat more likely.<sup>38</sup> Australia could, of course, reasonably decide that it cannot afford such options, especially once austerity measures hit the defence force following the inevitable end of the current resource boom. But there should be no doubt that sacrificing Australia's capability to meet its South East Asian commitment would be a decision of profound importance, and should be taken in full view of the consequences.

Unfortunately, recent Australian policy documents have already become noticeably less attentive to details when discussing Australia's capability to meet this commitment. When the 2007 *Defence Update* states that "[o]ur Navy must be able to establish sea control and operate freely within our region, while denying such freedoms to an opponent",<sup>39</sup> one cannot but wonder whether that statement has been based on a serious evaluation as to how that may possibly be achieved with Australia's currently available and planned air and naval capabilities. Certainly, if Navy and Air Force should ever draw up capability and budget plans to fulfil that mission, one can expect that Defence would quickly realize, as the 1972 *Australian Defence Review* had done, that

By no stretch of imagination could Australia assume in the foreseeable future a capability to control—even if we were to wish to do so—the vast areas of ocean which give access to the coasts of our continent and dependencies—though in selected areas we need to be able to do this. Our broader maritime interests may be better served by being capable of

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<sup>37</sup> Monk, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Peter Nicholson and David Connery, *Australia's Future Joint Strike Fighter Fleet: How much is too little?*, Canberra, Kokoda Foundation, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, p. 50.

denying to others the measure of control which they would need in order to threaten the interests of Australia or its immediate neighbours.<sup>40</sup>

If the next government's defence and national security policy can find a framework that balances—in a way that finds bipartisan support—Australian national security commitments and capabilities through adjusting ambitions, controlling future resource allocations, or more focused capability development concepts, it will have done a great service to the country. Otherwise, Australia's defence posture will be increasingly reliant on smoke and mirrors, rather than real military power. That bluff may never be called. If it ever was, however, the price to pay could well be terrible. The Melians can attest to that.

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<sup>40</sup> Department of Defence, *Australian Defence Review*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 1972, p. 21.