

A New Defence White Paper: Moving On From The Five Circles?

Stephan Frühling

A new defence White Paper needs to establish a framework that can guide coherent Australian defence and capability planning decisions. This article discusses the role of geography in defence planning and reviews the framework of *Defence 2000*, which is found wanting in several regards. A new set of five modified strategic objectives, as well as ways of deriving force structure principles, is proposed. The article closes with a discussion of the relevance of the concept of self-reliance in South East Asia.

Seven years have elapsed since the last Australian defence White Paper, *Defence 2000*, was published—not long in defence planning terms, but a long time ago in terms of the recent Australian defence debate. Two ‘Updates’ of the White Paper in 2003 and 2005 included significant capability decisions in the wake of Australia’s engagement in the ‘war on terror’ and its increased regional role, but did not clarify whether and how Australia’s defence planning basis needed to be adapted. Hence, the latest *Defence Update 2007* calls for

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.¹

To help develop such a framework, this article begins by discussing the role of geography in capability development, re-evaluates the 2000 Defence White Paper, and makes recommendations on how to define force structure requirements in the next White Paper.

Military Capability and the Role of Geography

Obvious questions to be addressed by the authors of a new Defence White Paper include: Should the Australian Defence Force (ADF) be structured around the most likely contingencies, or the ones with the severest consequences? Should it be optimised for Australia’s wars of choice, or its wars of necessity? Can the country afford to concentrate on today’s problems, or must it prepare now for tomorrow’s challenges?

While these questions can be formulated as binary choices, the answers need not be. Major procurement programs determine the shape of the ADF for decades to come, but sub-systems, training, doctrine, logistic support

¹ Department of Defence, *Australia’s National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, p. 25.

and, to some extent, even platform numbers can be adapted over time. Defence planning and force structuring is thus a problem of maximising the strategic utility of the ADF over time. On the one hand, each particular aspect of a capability—such as platform types, numbers, subsystems or logistic support—is a constraint for those aspects that can be changed within a shorter time. On the other hand, the fact that capabilities are more than mere platforms means that any force structure will always have an inherent level of flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances over time. If one considers decisions on readiness levels, at the very short-term end of that spectrum, defence planning decisions about capability even begin to merge into employment decisions proper.

Few threats are sufficiently clear and imminent to determine all aspects of military capability—possible exceptions include NATO during the Cold War, or Taiwan today. In the absence of a clear and imminent threat *that is likely to remain the dominant concern over decades*, the main task of the authors of the new White Paper will thus be to decide what particular considerations to use to determine each aspect of ADF capability. In particular, the authors will need to distinguish between those force structure aspects that can be changed within a relatively short time (for example smaller weapon systems, logistics, training or readiness) and those that will endure for decades—in particular, platforms such as aircraft or major naval combatants. While the former category of decisions will need to be responsive to the challenges of the day, the latter need to be made with an eye to possible challenges over the long term.

Hence, recent arguments that Australia's defence policy should be based on supporting a certain conception of world 'order',² or make a contribution to the Western efforts in the global 'clash of values',³ do have merit as they describe the tasks that the ADF will most likely be undertaking in the coming years. But the authors of the new White Paper will know little about the most likely scenarios that the ADF will face a decade hence, and they can only speculate about the state of political relationships between great powers in Asia. Over longer timescales, Defence policy must focus on the most severe, rather than most likely, scenarios. Despite sensationalist claims about modern terrorism, truly existential threats still require the projection of significant military force over distance. Despite being downplayed in Australia's recent debates, geography thus remains a reliable indicator of the types of challenges both an enemy and the ADF would have to face, should a serious threat to Australia develop.

In gauging the enduring significance of geography, the authors of the new White Paper might ponder its impact on the strategic choices made by

² Rod Lyon, *Australia's Strategic Fundamentals*, Special Report, no. 6, Canberra, ASPI, 2007.

³ Allan Behm, 'The Need for an Australian National Security Strategy', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), p. 22.

maritime powers throughout history. It is true that the sea is a highway that leads such powers to fight in faraway places. But it is also true that the sea does not, of itself, provide safety for the home country. Hence, the primary concern of every significant maritime power was the security of its home waters: For the Spanish, that meant checking first Arab, then Ottoman advances into the Eastern Mediterranean—in battles of much larger scope than any of their colonial adventures. For the British, this meant giving highest priority to superiority in the Channel, and the independence of the Low Countries (whose own maritime ambitions, like the ones of the Portuguese, were hence doomed to fail). Even the global engagement of the United States is ultimately based on the fact that the Monroe Doctrine is under no serious challenge today.

Unlike New Zealand or Canada, Australia cannot rely on a major ally that would have to defend it in order to defend itself. Hence, the geographic realities of Australia's position in the South of maritime Asia must remain the basis for Australian defence planning over the long term, without succumbing to geographic or historical determinism on the one hand, nor disregarding the adaptability of military capability, which enables governments to respond to shorter-term imperatives. Hence the overall aim of the new White Paper should continue to be:

to provide Australia with a set of capabilities that will be flexible enough to provide governments with a range of military options across a spectrum of credible situations *within the priorities set out in this [White Paper].*⁴

The Strategic Framework of *Defence 2000*

This article now turns to how the *Defence 2000* White Paper used geography to guide defence planning decisions, having regard to the following judgment:

We have given highest priority to the interests and objectives closest to Australia. In some circumstances a major crisis far from Australia may be more important to our future security than a minor problem close at hand. But in general, the closer a crisis or problem to Australia, the more important it would probably be to our security and the more likely we would be able to help to do something about it.⁵

From this judgement the 2000 White Paper derived a hierarchy of five strategic objectives⁶ based on the direct importance of an adverse development to Australia's security, *and* the country's ability to actually influence events.

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 54. Emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

⁶ The White Paper itself does not use the terms 'concentric circle' or 'ring', and the suggestion of a cartographically mechanistic approach implied in these terms does not do justice to the distinctions established between objectives.

FIVE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The first strategic objective relates to the defence of Australia itself. As all its predecessors since 1976, the White Paper sees Australia's territorial integrity as very secure, invasion as credible only after significant changes in the security environment, and major attacks as very unlikely, but not impossible.⁷ Minor attacks are also seen as possible, but unlikely.⁸ Overall, however, the White Paper still judges that "[e]ven if the risk of an attack on Australia is low, the consequences would be so serious that it must be addressed."⁹ The White Paper confirms that Australia should be self-reliant in combat forces required for the defence of Australia against armed attack, and that the relevant military strategy would centre on the defence of the maritime approaches.¹⁰

The second strategic objective relates to

the stability, integrity and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood, which we share with Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and the island countries of the Southwest Pacific. We would be concerned about major internal challenges that threatened the stability and cohesion of any of these countries. We would also be concerned about any threat of outside aggression against them. We have a key interest in helping to prevent the positioning in neighbouring states of foreign forces that might be used to attack Australia.¹¹

Beside more humanitarian considerations and the crime and uncontrolled people movements caused by the failure of states on Australia's doorstep, the country thus also has a hard strategic interest in the viability and stability of these countries, as they are in a geographic position from which military force could be directly projected against Australia. An explicit willingness to conduct Australian-led peace enforcement, peacekeeping, and relief missions to stabilize its close neighbourhood—such as INTERFET in East Timor the year before—was one of the new elements of the 2000 White Paper. It writes that Australia "should be prepared to be the largest force contributor to such operations",¹² and thus carry responsibility for success or failure of such operations.

Stability and security between the states in South East Asia form the third strategic objective. Australia's

interest is to maintain a resilient regional community that can cooperate to prevent the intrusion of potentially hostile external powers and resolve peacefully any problems that may arise between countries in the region. We would be concerned about any major external threat to the territorial

⁷ The White Paper explicitly mentions ballistic missiles and WMD capabilities in this regard.

⁸ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, pp. 23-24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

integrity of the nations in our nearer region, especially in maritime Southeast Asia ...¹³

By omission, it is clear that Australia does not plan to influence domestic events militarily here—something that can be explained by both the greater geographic distance to Australia, the demographic realities of South East Asia and the size of regional land forces. However, “Australia would want to be in a position ... to help our neighbours defend themselves”¹⁴ against external aggression. It “would want to be able to make a substantial contribution ... especially if it involved our undertakings under the FPDA [Five Power Defence Arrangements].”¹⁵

In terms of operational strategy, the White Paper extends the ADF emphasis on maritime operations to the participation in regional coalitions, since “[f]ortunately the strategic geography of our neighbourhood makes this feasible.”¹⁶ Australia’s contribution would thus concentrate on combat aircraft, surface- and sub-surface combatants, complemented by special operations troops. General purpose land forces would be largely limited to securing bases.¹⁷

The fourth strategic objective relates to the avoidance of major conflict and instability in the Asia-Pacific as a whole, notably in Northeast Asia. Australia is clear about the need

to avoid the emergence in the Asia Pacific region of a security environment dominated by any powers whose strategic interests might be inimical to Australia’s.¹⁸

It goes on to state that

There is a small but still significant possibility of growing and sustained confrontation between the major powers in Asia, and even of outright conflict. Australia’s interests could be deeply engaged in such a conflict, especially if it involved the United States, or if it intruded into our nearer region.¹⁹

Hence, Australia “would want to have the capacity to make a significant contribution to any coalition we thought it appropriate to join”²⁰—a deliberately lesser ambition than in the third strategic objective.

¹³ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51. See also p. 44 for the same formulation regarding the South West Pacific.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷ The White Paper makes clear that Australia “would provide such support only at the request of a neighbouring government, and would expect to be able to operate from bases in its territory.” Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 51. See also p. 44 for the same formulation regarding the South West Pacific.

Finally, the fifth strategic objective relates to developments elsewhere and “the efforts of the international community, especially the United Nations, to uphold global security.”²¹ The country could make “a relatively modest contribution to any wider UN or US-led coalition”²² in support of global stability.

DEFINING FORCE STRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS

In defining the force structure of the ADF, the White Paper gives overwhelming priority to only one of these five strategic objectives—the defence of Australia—which, it states, “provides a clear basis for our defence planning”.²³ Only the size of the Army is explicitly influenced by the demands of expeditionary operations.²⁴ However, despite major replacement programs announced for both the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), the White Paper was largely silent on how quantitative sufficiency for the defence of Australia should be measured. The absence of explicit justification for the planned one-to-one replacement of the F-18 and F-111 on the one hand, and the reduction in the number of major RAN surface combatants to eleven on the other,²⁵ was one of the major deficiencies of the document.²⁶

With regards to other strategic objectives, the White Paper continued its predecessors’ approach of generating forces out of the portfolio acquired for the defence of Australia,²⁷ which however only drives the larger order-of-battle decisions. Training, logistics or the qualitative level of weapons and sub-systems on major platforms—all of which had been oriented towards the requirements of the defence of Australia under the 1987 White Paper—are now determined by demands placed on the ADF in pursuit of the other objectives.²⁸

Land forces thus preserve their previous role of supporting the defence of the maritime approaches through base protection and the defeat of any enemy incursions on Australian territory.²⁹ In addition, they are now to conduct peace enforcement, peacekeeping, stabilization and relief missions—which provides for the pursuit of the second strategic objective in

²¹ Ibid., p. 31.

²² Ibid., p. 52.

²³ Ibid., p. 46.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 78-84.

²⁵ Eight ANZAC frigates and three new Air Warfare Destroyers.

²⁶ Hugh White, principal author of the White Paper, later stated that the document was drafted under instructions from the Cabinet that no capability was to be cut, and obsolete equipment to be replaced. Hugh White, ‘Buying Air Warfare Destroyers: A Strategic Decision,’ *Issues Brief*, Sydney, Lowy Institute, 2005, p. 3.

²⁷ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, pp. 12, 49-50, 52, 92.

²⁸ Since 1997, operational readiness was already to be determined by regional contingencies. Department of Defence, *Australia’s Strategic Policy*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p. 41.

²⁹ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 47.

the South Pacific.³⁰ Air and naval forces preserve their traditional role of defeating attacks against Australia by aircraft and naval vessels as they are available to regional militaries, including strike. In addition, they are to be able to contribute to coalition operations in high-intensity conflicts—which, given the geography of Southeast Asia, provides for contributions to the third strategic objective.³¹ As Australia does not aim for decisive influence in the fourth and fifth strategic objective, beyond the neighbourhood, the White Paper sees a significant scope for choice in the country's contributions there. Thus, land forces would be available for lower intensity operations, while air and naval forces could participate in higher-intensity operations.³²

Deriving the overall force structure from considerations regarding the Defence of Australia implies that any substantial forces deployed elsewhere would be returned to the region in the occasion—as were the Australian divisions in the Middle East during World War II. The White Paper makes this explicit by stating that

We ... do not plan on the ability to undertake major operations simultaneously in more than one theatre of operations. However, within a theatre of operation, especially in the defence of Australia, we would need forces large enough to undertake some types of operation simultaneously in widely separated locations. And in our immediate region, we may need to be able to sustain one major deployment and undertake a lesser deployment at the same time.³³

In a later section, the White Paper specifies the latter as

to sustain a brigade deployed on operations for extended periods, and at the same time maintain at least a battalion group available for deployment elsewhere.³⁴

Problems and Inconsistencies of *Defence 2000*

Even if one disagrees with the strategic objectives established in the *Defence 2000* White Paper or the way in which it derives force structure requirements from them, the overall framework and language it uses to discuss Australia's strategic geography remain useful for discussing its own actual or potential shortcomings. These relate to four different questions: The judgements regarding force employment, the role of the defence of Australia, and the distinction between strategic objectives relating to the South Pacific and South East Asia, and the wider Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world, respectively.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 53-54, 85, 88, 92.

³² Ibid., p. 52.

³³ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

FORCE EMPLOYMENT JUDGMENTS

The first section of this article discussed that, in the absence of a clear threat, force structure decisions made on the basis of geography should be conceptually separated from force employment in the short term. If strategic objectives of higher importance are not threatened, any government will naturally feel that it has full discretion to determine the military effort it would like to dedicate to a particular mission or coalition. This highlights two deficiencies of the *Defence 2000* White Paper.

First, it defined a careful hierarchy of defence commitments, from self-reliance in the defence of Australia, over the 'largest' contributions to operations in the second objective, 'substantial' and 'significant' contributions to the third and fourth, down to 'relatively modest' contributions to the fifth objective. This hierarchy may be a correct description of the commitments an Australian government would be likely to make. However, since force structure decisions themselves are explicitly linked to the Defence of Australia only, this hierarchy lacks a clear function—though it might be seen to constrain the actions of more ambitious policymakers.

Second, the White Paper's requirement that Army be able to deploy a brigade and a battalion concurrently was a judgement of sufficiency, based both on the size of the Army, and the INTERFET experience.³⁵ It would have been difficult at the time to anticipate the sustained nature of several ADF deployments both within and outside the region that were to begin the following year. Nevertheless, the White Paper should have acknowledged that this requirement may have to be revised in the light of operational experience and demands. Certainly, operations since have seen the concurrent deployment of several battalion-groups to different operations, rather than one large and one small operation. The new White Paper will need to address the long-term implications for the ADF sustainment capabilities of this operational pattern, should the government want it to continue.³⁶

THE DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA AND FORCE STRUCTURE DECISIONS

The second set of issues relates to the way in which *Defence 2000* defines the defence of Australia, and derives force structure implications at the order-of-battle level from it. It can be argued that such an approach is no longer adequate to the strategic challenges facing Australia, for the following reasons:

³⁵ Hugh White, personal email to the author, 29 September 2006.

³⁶ The government has already decided, of course, to expand the Army's size by up to two battalions.

First, the 'defence of Australia' has arguably become a day-to-day task for the ADF, rather than a mere possible future contingency.³⁷ In the past, guidance documents acknowledged aid to civil authorities as a peacetime activity, but it was not to interfere with the ADF's primary task of preparing for warfighting. Today, however, ADF naval and surveillance assets are not only an integral part of Australia's maritime security effort. SAS tactical assault groups and the Incident Response Regiment are also new force structure elements dedicated to the domestic counterterrorism task. In addition, the United States, Japan, Israel, Europe (through NATO), South Korea and Taiwan have all begun to deploy or seriously study homeland missile defence systems in recent years. Given the widespread doubts about the effectiveness and reliability of deterrence, especially in the extended form, Australia will at some stage also be confronted with the question of whether it will procure at least a rudimentary capability to defend its population, based on Ground Based Interceptors.³⁸ In the new White Paper, such continuous operations of ADF assets to protect Australian territory short of a direct military threat from the region will need to be conceived of separately from the contingent scenario of the defence of Australia.

Second, the highly contingent nature of any direct military threat to the Australian homeland complicates efforts to derive a clear set of quantitative force structure requirements from it. In truth, Australian defence planning after Vietnam never truly came to terms with this difficulty. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it was circumvented through the concept of the ADF as a 'Core Force', which was to contain the nuclei of a whole range of capabilities that could, in theory, be expanded in reaction to a *future* threat. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the use of *present and foreseeable* regional capabilities to conduct low and escalated low-level, short warning conflict created a clear yardstick of qualitative and quantitative sufficiency, albeit at the cost of a certain artificiality of the threat assessment, given the overall sympathetic relations within the region.

Both approaches were based on the assumption that the international order in Asia was stable, so that strategic warning would always be available of the emergence of hostile advanced military capabilities within striking distance of Australia. The 1997 *Australia's Strategic Policy* had already explicitly remarked that this assumption was not valid any more, since great-power tensions in the Asia-Pacific are now caused by *current shifts* in the regional

³⁷ For background, see Andrew Smith and Anthony Bergin, 'Australian domestic security: The role of Defence', *Strategic Insights*, no. 31, Canberra, ASPI, 2006.

³⁸ An argument can be made that, for an adversary with a very limited ICBM arsenal, threatening a sure hit against an Australian city may be more attractive than the very substantial risk of losing the missile to an American or allied missile defence system. For a discussion of an Australian homeland defence system, see Stephan Frühling, *Ballistic Missile Defence for Australia: Policies, Requirements and Options*, Canberra Paper, no. 151, Canberra, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 2003.

military balance³⁹—as opposed to the relatively stable Cold War situation in Asia after the Sino-Soviet split. Today, it is quite conceivable that these shifts may lead to a general deterioration of the security environment in the Asia-Pacific.⁴⁰ It is credible that, over the next 10-15 years, China could use its influence in countries in Australia's region of paramount interest to establish advance military bases there within a relatively short amount of time, *within the strategic and operational limits that a generally deteriorated security situation would entail for that country as well.*

This means that *quantitative* force structure requirements for the defence of Australia become even more dependent on friable assumptions regarding enemy orders of battle in various scenarios than before. Yet, if less confidence can be placed in the resulting estimates, it also becomes less defensible to exclude from explicit consideration long-term quantitative requirements derived from other strategic objectives.

THE AREA OF PARAMOUNT DEFENCE INTEREST

The third complex of questions relates to the distinction between strategic objectives two and three. The former comprises that part of the neighbourhood, primarily in the South Pacific, where Australia is willing to lead coalitions to maintain domestic stability, as well as collective defence against outside interference. The latter relates to Southeast Asia more broadly, where Australia 'only' aims at influencing inter-state conflict by making decisive contributions to regional coalitions. The *Defence Update 2007* has largely dropped that distinction and discusses both under the heading of "Where Australia Must Lead".⁴¹

To some extent, *Defence 2000* was less clear than it could have been on the separation between both strategic objectives, as it included Indonesia in the list of countries that defined the second strategic objective. However, Australia will always have to react to adverse domestic developments or instability in Indonesia in a very different manner than it could to similar developments in East Timor or the South Pacific. While it is feasible for the ADF to conduct stabilization operations in the latter countries—indeed, it has done so on several occasions in the last few years—any such operation in Indonesia is inconceivable without the explicit consent of the government of this nation of more than 230 million people.⁴²

However, merging both strategic objectives is also consistent with a view of maritime strategy as necessarily involving operations on land from the sea,

³⁹ Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰ Hugh White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, Lowy Institute Paper, no. 16, Sydney, Lowy Institute, 2006, pp. 10-14.

⁴¹ Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, pp. 26-27.

⁴² CIA World Factbook, < <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html> > [Accessed 29 August 2007].

which has gained in prominence in the Australian debate of recent years. Michael Evans, for example, wrote that under the existing policy framework

the Australian Government may be left with only the single option of applying maritime counterforce by means of sea-air strike ... simply because it lacks sufficient land forces for effective offshore deployment.⁴³

In his view,

a proportional response might require using a tailored land force against an island base—which might be the centre of gravity in the inner arc of the archipelago.⁴⁴

Similar views were supported by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade,⁴⁵ and at an operational level, the Army's Manoeuvre Operations in a Littoral Environment concept provides a setting for this type of amphibious power projection missions.⁴⁶ In addition, the White Paper is less clear than it could have been in distinguishing Australia's ambitions in maritime South East Asia from those in Indochina,⁴⁷ which also weakens its argument regarding the lesser importance of Army in that objective.

Defence 2000's basic framework of giving Army the major role in strategic objective two, the South Pacific, and naval and air forces priority in strategic objective three, South East Asia, thus needs at least to be reconsidered. It is quite possible, for example, that a capability to conduct amphibious operations of a limited scale could be useful in South East Asia: If one reverses the old argument that the size of the Australian Army determines the minimum size of hostile landing parties that would need to traverse the air-sea gap, Australian amphibious capabilities also define the minimum defensive measures an enemy would have to take in the archipelago. Even if no such operation was ever carried out, the need to maintain increased base security forces may make the enemy more vulnerable to interdiction of his supply lines by Australian naval and air forces.⁴⁸

To guide force structure choices, however, strategic objectives one and two need to be clearly distinguished, since Australia needs to clearly define its ambitions with regards to stabilization operations. Much less than the

⁴³ Michael Evans, *The Role of the Australian Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Working Paper, no. 101, September 1998, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia's Maritime Strategy*, Canberra, Parliament of Australia, 2004, pp. 47-53.

⁴⁶ Russel Parkin, *A Capability of First Resort: Amphibious Operations and Australian Defence Policy 1901-2001*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Working Paper, no. 117, May 2002, pp. 38.

⁴⁷ It alludes to such a distinction when stating that: "We would be concerned about any major external threat to the territorial integrity of the nations in our nearer region, especially in maritime Southeast Asia". Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ An effect that demonstrates the differences of arguing on a strategic, as opposed to tactical, level.

defence of South East Asia, these also require Defence to work as part of an Australian whole-of-government response.⁴⁹

BEYOND THE AREA OF PARAMOUNT DEFENCE INTEREST

The final area of inconsistencies and shortcomings of the *Defence 2000* framework relates to the difference between strategic objectives four and five, the Asia-Pacific beyond the neighbourhood and global interests beyond the Asia-Pacific. The *Defence 2000* White Paper had separated the two since adverse developments in the Asia-Pacific, notably deteriorating China-US and/or China-Japan relationships, would lead to a direct deterioration of Australia's strategic position through their ripple-effects in South East Asia, and the US policy in the region.

Again, the *Defence Update 2007* has dropped this distinction, and summarizes both under the heading of "Where Australia Should Contribute". It aims to make "significant ADF contributions to coalition operations where our national interests are closely engaged", and mentions both the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East in this regard.⁵⁰ Indeed, a number of arguments can be advanced for such a perspective:

First, in relation to both strategic objectives, Australia would use military contributions to coalition operations to achieve an indirect political effect on the policy and resolve of its allies, rather than a direct military effect on the enemy.⁵¹ Australia might choose to make a more substantial contribution (in terms of the percentage of overall ADF assets) to conflict in North Asia. However, it is far from certain whether the relationship between political effect and military effort is indeed a linear one. Moreover, distinguishing both strategic objectives on that basis alone unnecessarily blurs the line between force structuring and employment issues.

Second, the assumption that developments in North Asia are more important than developments elsewhere needs at least to be re-evaluated in the light of the conflict with violent Islamism that has developed since the *Defence 2000* White Paper. Great power conflict in North Asia would certainly have detrimental consequences for stability in Southeast Asia, but given the largely Muslim populations of Indonesia and Malaysia, so could a serious deterioration of relations between the West and the Islamic world.

Third, the implicit judgment in the *Defence 2000* White Paper that an Australian contribution to operations in North Asia would heavily emphasize maritime forces may not necessarily be true. In the triangle of relationships between the United States, China and Japan, the management of

⁴⁹ See the proposal for an Australian 'Peace Corps' in Ross Babbage, 'Four Key Defence Capability Challenges', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), pp. 83-85.

⁵⁰ Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, pp. 27-29.

⁵¹ A point further developed in Stephan Frühling, 'Balancing Australia's Strategic Commitments', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), pp. 154-156.

stabilization efforts after a collapse of North Korea, for example, may be as critical for the long-term security outlook of the region as a conflict over Taiwan that may never come.⁵² Moreover, while RAN surface and subsurface combatants would be valuable, RAAF contributions to a Taiwan conflict would be seriously hampered by the fact that the limited ramp space at bases close the theatre would not even allow all US tactical air assets to be used.

Hence, the political and military-strategic effects of developments beyond South East Asia need to be more clearly spelled out and separated. More specifically, if Australia wants to influence or mitigate developments *politically*, coalition operations beyond the neighbourhood are an appropriate means. But if it wants to mitigate their impact on Australia *militarily*, it could always only do so by operating in strategic objectives two and three, South East Asia and the South Pacific. Only here could Australia exercise sufficient power to stop detrimental flow-on effects from spilling into its immediate neighbourhood.

Recommendations for the Next White Paper

What does the preceding analysis mean for the definition of strategic objectives in the next White Paper, and for the derivation of associated force structure requirements?

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The purpose of Australia's defence effort should be conceived of in terms of five strategic objectives:

- The 'zeroth' strategic objective relates to peacetime aid to the civil authority, including maritime surveillance and security, counterterrorism, and—at some point in the future—the operation of a homeland missile defence system. Here, defence will often only be a supporting, rather than leading agency. Force structure requirements will have to flow from a whole-of-government, national security perspective—for example, it will be necessary to evaluate the utility of defence assets against those of other agencies involved in the securing of Australia's maritime approaches.⁵³
- The first strategic objective is the traditional one of defending Australia against direct armed attack from hostile forces lodged in the islands to Australia's north and north east. Interdiction in the air-sea gap remains an appropriate operational strategy for this task, the execution of which

⁵² Rory Medcalf, 'Strategic Roles beyond the Paramount Area: Asia Northeast and West', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), pp. 25-37.

⁵³ Sam Bateman, 'Securing Australia's Maritime Approaches', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), pp. 109-129.

implies that earlier efforts to keep hostile forces at a distance from the continent have failed.

- The second strategic objective comprises the domestic stability of the countries in the South Pacific and East Timor, their security from armed attack, and the absence of significant political influence of external powers hostile to Australia. Army's ability to perform peacekeeping, peace enforcement and stabilization operations, supported by RAN and RAAF and backed up by the escalation potential that these services provide, will be Defence's main contribution to this objective. However, recent experience in East Timor and the Solomon Islands demonstrates that these operations require a whole-of-government approach that will also influence the definition of force structure requirements of the ADF. It is, for example, not obvious whether increasing the International Deployment Group (IDG) of the Australian Federal Police (AFP),⁵⁴ may not be the best way of providing additional manpower for stabilization operations, rather than an additional Army battalion.
- The third strategic objective relates to *maritime* South East Asia. Australia has a central interest in preserving them as a geostrategic barrier that prevents the lodgement of hostile forces across the air-sea gap, and hence in friendly relationships with its constituent countries, in the absence of inter-regional conflict that would open avenues for great powers with interest inimical to Australia, and in assisting regional countries counter external pressure. Moreover, it is only by leading regional coalitions here that Australia could prevent adverse developments outside the region, especially in North Asia and the Middle East, from directly threatening the country. Given regional geography and increasingly capable land forces in the region, the main ADF contribution to such operations would have to consist of naval and air forces, although a rudimentary capability of amphibious units to hold enemy bases at risk may also be useful, and select land force contributions, for example in the Southern Philippines, may be called for.
- The fourth strategic objective relates to the maintenance of international order in regions beyond the area of paramount defence interest, including North Asia and the Middle East. Here, Australia would fight wars of choice, rather than those of necessity. Its aim is to send political signals to its allies, rather than achieving direct military effect of its own. Hence, it retains a great deal of flexibility regarding the types of forces it would commit.

⁵⁴ See John McFarlane, 'The Thin Blue Line: The Strategic Role of the Australian Federal Police', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2007), pp. 91-108.

DEFINING FORCE STRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS

When deciding which of these objectives should drive force structure decisions, it is important not to see them as independent categories. As outlined above, deteriorations of the global security environment would become a direct and significant threat to Australia if they impacted on the area of paramount defence interest, i.e. South East Asia and the South Pacific. In addition, this is also the area where Australia could seek direct military effect through ADF operations, rather than be limited to political symbolism.

At the same time, it is scarcely credible that an outside military power would threaten the South Pacific—or even Australia directly at the Air-Sea gap—before exerting latent or direct pressure on maritime South East Asia, to the extent that Australia would see that third strategic objective as being threatened. Conceiving of the ADF as the core of a regional coalition to maintain South East Asia free from outside pressure in some regard brings the country's defence policy back to the earlier days of 'Forward Defence'—with the great difference, however, that it would now be Australia, not the United Kingdom (UK) or United States, that regional allies may look for to close critical capability gaps.

The new White Paper needs to consider long term geopolitical scenarios. Here it is entirely conceivable that Australia could find itself without regional allies willing to check outside pressure, leaving Australia itself as the *last* line of defence. This means that force structure requirements should be derived from objectives one to three, the defence of Australia, the South Pacific, and South East Asia. *Defence 2000* was correct to point out that forces acquired for the defence of Australia would also be suitable for the latter two types of task—but the reverse can also be true, if similar operational strategies are maintained. It follows that:

- The number of RAAF combat aircraft, as well as RAN submarines and major surface combatants, will flow from adequate performance in a number of scenarios relating to the first and third strategic objectives, the defence of Australia and South East Asia. In order to investigate possible trade-offs between different types of platforms, more detailed studies must begin with broad-level strategic considerations, rather than merely demonstrate the tactical usefulness of particular programs or capabilities. In this context, it may be worth revisiting the Defence of Australia studies of the 1970s.
- The required size of the Army will largely flow from concurrency judgments regarding the second strategic objective, the South Pacific, which may well change over time. The experience of the last few years demonstrates that reliable predictions in this regard can be very difficult. It may be appropriate to cost force structures with six to nine battalions, in order to gain an understanding of resulting budgetary or personnel

trade-offs. The size of the ADF's infantry forces should also not be determined independently from the size of the AFP's IDG.

- The size of the amphibious capabilities required by the ADF should flow from the demands that initial-entry operations in stabilization operations in the South Pacific may pose. In terms of training and operational concepts, these forces should then also be able to hold minor enemy bases in South East Asia at risk. However, given the primacy of air and naval capabilities in that theatre and the assumption that Australia would operate as the leader of a regional coalition, amphibious capabilities should not be sized for these operations.
- Forces for operations beyond the area of paramount defence interest should continue to be drawn from those for objectives one to three. However, minor adjustments, for example in terms of standard nuclear, biological and chemical protection kits or mission-specific equipment, may be appropriate.

Conclusion: A New Understanding of Self-Reliance

While the framework proposed in this article may fall short of some imprudent rhetoric of recent years, it does in fact represent a noticeable expansion of Australian strategic ambitions. It suggests that an adapted concept of self-reliance is still important to Australian defence planning, even if any future operation is highly likely to be coalition-based. In recent years, the principle in its 'classic' form—self-reliance in combat forces in the direct defence of Australia—has not become controversial as such, but it largely fell by the wayside as the ADF's attention shifted from force structure questions to an increasing tempo of operations in the region and beyond, and its ever increasing integration into the US logistic and supply system.

However, it is important to remember that self-reliance never meant that Australia planned to eschew allied assistance in operations close to home, or that the ADF would operate without US assistance in non-combat areas. What it did mean, however, was that Australia should be able to fight and win its battles of necessity without becoming a burden on its allies—who may not so much be unwilling, as unable to come to the country's assistance in what could well be a globally challenging time.

Self-reliance in South East Asia thus means that Australia should be able to work with like-minded countries in the region to collectively deflect or mitigate the threat of force that could credibly be brought onto the region. While a situation in which that might be necessary could develop fairly rapidly, it would mean that the politics of the wider Asia-Pacific and South East Asia as we know it today would already be history. It is thus important to remember that self-reliance in South East Asia—like self-reliance in the defence of Australia—is a force structuring concept, *not* a foreign policy.

Given regional sensitivities and concerns with collective security as much as collective defence,⁵⁵ it is unlikely to result in a NATO-style organization. However, Australia's ongoing involvement in the FPDA and bilateral security arrangements in the region are an obvious starting point to strengthen its role as a quiet pillar of support for the nations of maritime South East Asia.

Uncertainties—both known and yet unknown—affect credible scenarios of the defence of Australia and those related to South East Asia. Translating the aforementioned strategic objectives into a basis for force planning thus requires a combination of thorough analysis and judgement—as does any other rigorous defence policy. However, the task may be facilitated if reinforcing South East Asia is analysed as a problem of sustaining a certain level of presence, rather than of determining a specific surge capability whose sufficiency would be much harder to correctly anticipate. A few questions that would need to be answered are then immediately obvious—for example:

- Would the RAN and RAAF be able to sustain a credible submarine barrier across, for example, the Singapore-Natunas-Kalimantan gap?⁵⁶
- Are the currently planned ship numbers sufficient to provide, on a continuous basis, the anti-air and anti-submarine self-defence capabilities of a standing FPDA naval task force?
- Are regional capabilities sufficient to exclude from force structure considerations the possibility that the RAAF might once again have to deploy, for extended time, an air defence squadron to South East Asia?
- If such capabilities are deployed to South East Asia in the context of serious international tensions, how realistic is the assumption that they would be repatriated for contingencies closer to home?

It will, of course, not be possible to confidently answer all of these questions until the day. They will, however, be the type of question that future Australian force planners have to face in those situations that really matter to the country. The next White Paper could do much worse than raise them now, and provide these decisionmakers with credible options to maintain South East Asia as the first line of defence for Australia, rather than have to wait at the Air-Sea gap.

⁵⁵ An often ignored distinction discussed in Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962, pp. 181-204.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the ADF's atrophying anti-submarine capabilities, see Andrew Davis, 'The enemy below: Anti-submarine warfare in the ADF', *Special Report*, no. 2, Canberra, ASPI, 2007.

Stephan Frühling is Lecturer in Graduate Studies in Strategy and Defence Program of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and managing editor of Security Challenges. He has submitted a PhD thesis on strategic risk and defence planning, and published in Australia, Europe and the United States on ballistic missile defence, nuclear deterrence, counterproliferation, strategic theory and Australian defence policy. stephan_fruehling@hotmail.com.