
Learning to Walk Amongst Giants: The New Defence White Paper

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The primary challenge for the new Defence White Paper is to shape Australia's security approach for the longer term. It will need to define a strategy and force structure that will offer future Australian governments good options for the markedly different strategic environment anticipated for 2025-2050.

This is a demanding task. Indeed, it is so demanding that it will be tempting to assume that Australia's strategic circumstances thirty to forty years hence will be very similar to those of today. Strong institutional inertia will drive many to argue that nothing much will change and that a modernised version of today's 'balanced' force will be the safest option for the future. This article argues that complacent approaches such as these deserve careful scrutiny and are potentially very dangerous.

What the White Paper Needs to Do

The greatest challenge for the new Defence White Paper will be to analyse carefully the strategic tides of change likely to characterise the Asia-Pacific in 2025-2050 and detail an appropriate defence response. While the new White Paper will certainly need to take some modest account of the strategic situation in the shorter term and clarify the direction and focus of near-term defence activities and operations, this is not the timeframe that should drive the White Paper's logic and priorities. The reasons for this are clear.

Most key aspects of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and its developing capabilities for the next 15 years have already been decided. Many key equipments, systems and structures for this timeframe are already in service, some are currently being introduced and others are in various parts of the acquisition pipeline. Indeed, unless there were to be an emergency re-direction of defence priorities in the next few years, the ADF of 2020 is likely to look remarkably like a modernised version of the current ADF.

For the new White Paper this means that it may be appropriate to comment on prospective developments in the shorter term strategic environment and

¹ This comment is loosely based on an oral presentation delivered by the author at an ASPI workshop on 3 December 2007.

the ways in which the ADF might be employed during the coming 15 years. However, the central focus clearly needs to be on the longer term 2025-2050 timeframe. That is the period in which fundamental changes to Australia's defence capabilities will be possible, provided that decisions to make such changes are taken in the coming five years or so.

There are obvious challenges in taking this longer-term view. Attempting to foresee the broad shape of the international security environment that Australia will face in this more distant 2025-2050 timeframe is not straightforward. Standard intelligence assessments of most issues tend to confine themselves to 12-18 months into the future, with a few issues discussed with limited confidence five years ahead. The new White Paper needs to go further and draw on much longer term assessments.

Fortunately this assessment of the longer term outlook does not need to be fine-grained or precise. It needs only to focus on identifying the longer term strategic tides of change and can afford to overlook the periodic ripples across the international environment. These major tides of change, whilst they ebb and flow, are enduring and will be primary drivers of Australia's national security in the 2025-2050 timeframe.

Strategic Tides 20-40 Years Ahead

What then will be the primary strategic themes deserving emphasis? Amongst the themes that appear to warrant serious consideration are:

- The further marked increase in the number and type of non-state actors and the increasing pervasiveness of their influence.
- Marked changes in energy flows and energy balances in several parts of the world and the security implications that will result.
- The probable pervasiveness of new forms of mass media with resulting major consequences for most societies.
- The impact of much cheaper and larger-capacity air and other transport systems, increasing markedly the scale of international people movements, further complicating the challenges of border control.
- The introduction of far more effective defence and security surveillance systems which will have global capacities to monitor real-time with high resolution many high-priority activities.
- The likely advent of new forms of global reach able to deliver a range of precision effects at intercontinental range within minutes to a very few hours.

- Further dramatic increases in the speed, power and miniaturisation of computer systems.
- The scale, pace and dynamics of global warming and the range of security consequences that are credible during the coming 40 years.

While some, if not all, of these themes deserve consideration, the primary strategic challenges for Australia will probably not be driven by them. Far more pervasive is likely to be the need to adapt to the rise of two or three very major powers in the Asia-Pacific-Indian Ocean region. The distribution of strategic power in Australia's part of the world is shifting markedly. The Asia-Pacific-Indian Ocean is emerging rapidly as the primary centre of global power and this has fundamental implications for Australia's defence and broader security planning. Hence, a primary challenge for the new Defence White Paper will be to analyse the implications that flow from this new environment. In short, the White Paper needs to determine how Australia can best prepare itself to walk safely amongst the rising giants of the Asia-Pacific.²

What are likely to be some of the key characteristics of this markedly altered strategic environment? As Allan Behm points out in his recent Kokoda Paper, *Strategic Tides: Positioning Australia's Strategic Policy for 2050*,³ the United Nations estimates that in 2050 Australia's population will be about 28 million, but Indonesia's population will be 296 million, China's population will be 1,518 million and India's population will be an even larger 1,658 million.

Whereas Australia's economy is currently some 70% of the size of the combined economies of maritime Southeast Asia, by 2050 Indonesia's economy alone is projected to be three times the size of Australia's, India's economy will be 17 times the size of the Australian economy and China's economy will be some 24 times the size of the Australian economy in purchase power parity terms.

Moreover, in the 2025-2050 timeframe the Anglo-Saxon powers' long-standing dominance of the Asia-Pacific theatre will be coming to an end. The United States will almost certainly remain a superpower, a close ally of Australia and probably the most powerful single global player. However in that timeframe the United States will likely be one of several large players and its freedom of strategic action will almost certainly be significantly more constrained than at present.

This is not to suggest that any of the large and very powerful neighbours in Asia will necessarily seek to attack Australia or seek to use military force to

² The concept of learning to walk amongst giants owes some of its inspiration to Coral Bell's landmark paper *Living With Giants* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2005).

³ Allan Behm, *Strategic Tides: Positioning Australia's Security Policy to 2050*, Kokoda Paper, no 6 (Canberra: Kokoda Foundation, November 2007).

coerce a future Australian Government. However, several Asian countries will almost certainly have developed and deployed large and very sophisticated air, maritime and land forces. Should these countries wish, they would certainly be capable of operating most of these forces into, or within, Australia's immediate approaches.

Amongst the military forces of these much larger powers will be strong armies, sophisticated air combat forces, large and highly capable surface naval forces and also numerous advanced technology submarines. Several of these countries will also have deployed modern nuclear missile forces with regional and intercontinental range.

This is a markedly different strategic environment from that of today. By 2025-2050 the population, economic strength and probably the prevailing military relativities of Australia's strategic environment will have altered markedly. Even if not all of the developments suggested above come to fruition in the timeframes or in the manner anticipated, most will probably do so. Moreover, there are likely to be some unexpected developments that could make Australia's strategic outlook even more demanding than the above remarks might suggest. For instance, it is possible that we may see radical political change in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea or elsewhere in Australia's strategic approaches. We might see a significant proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. We could possibly also see radical technological breakthroughs in some defence technologies and systems that could cause Australian defence planners additional headaches. Nevertheless, despite the myriad uncertainties, the seemingly irresistible strategic tide with which Australian defence planners will need to come to terms is that the country will be walking among giants, some of whom may not be friendly.

This outlook poses major challenges to Australia's habits of strategic thought and should encourage serious consideration of non-standard force structure and broader defence approaches.

Alternative Force Structure Options

In order to illustrate some of the force structure dilemmas likely to arise from this outlook, two force structure approaches are sketched out briefly below.

The first force structure option might best be called the Balanced Force Option. The Balanced Force Option looks rather like a modernized version of the current ADF force structure, with a few tweaks and a couple of new highlights. Key features would be:

- Significantly strengthened wide area intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities;

- 100 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF);
- 24 Super Hornets;
- 6 airborne early warning aircraft;
- 6 aerial tankers;
- 9-12 major surface combatants including 4 air warfare destroyers;
- 4-8 new generation submarines;
- 2 maritime sea lift ships;
- 2 logistic support ships; and
- An Army of 30,000 regular troops (and some 20,00 reserves) mainly organised into mechanised infantry and special force units equipped with 150 utility helicopters, 50 armed reconnaissance helicopters, 60-80 tanks, self-propelled artillery and basic air defence capabilities.

This Defence Force structure would be capable of modest independent operations in the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia and, when partnered with United States forces, it would be capable of making a contribution to more substantial operations in Northeast Asia and in the Persian Gulf.

However, this Balanced Force Option probably only makes sense if the strategic environment in 2025-2040 is very similar to that of today. In other words, for the Balanced Force Option to be preferred it would be necessary to assume that in 20-40 years time the strategic environment will continue to have, at a minimum, the following four key characteristics:

- Australia's economic, demographic and political weight and leverage will remain similar to their current levels in the Southwest Pacific, Southeast Asia and in the wider Asian environment.
- The United States remains both the predominant global superpower and an exceptionally close ally of Australia.
- The military capabilities of the major countries in Southeast Asia and, indeed, in Northeast and South Asia remain, in relative terms, broadly comparable to those we see today.
- The strategic behaviours of the major Asian powers remain benign and unthreatening.

While one or two of these four features might characterise the strategic environment of 2025-2050, it would take a great leap of faith for defence planners to assume that all four of these characteristics will mark Australia's longer-term future.

If, as suggested above, the medium-term future is likely to be markedly different from the recent past, a force structure that was simply a modernised version of that we see today—the so-called Balanced Force Option—would appear to be sub-optimal.

A strong case can be made that in the markedly altered future we seem likely to face Australian Governments will want rather more from the Defence Organisation. In particular, future governments are likely to want a force structure that offers far more deterrence, strategic leverage and flexible offensive and defensive capabilities than a continued Balanced Force Option could offer.

Certainly, future governments will want the ADF to be able to conduct successful stabilisation and peacekeeping operations in the Southwest Pacific. They will also want the ADF to be able to make strategically and operationally useful contributions to combined operations with our close allies in distant theatres.

However, future Australian governments will also insist on having a far more credible defence capability to help shape a favourable regional security environment and to deter and, if needed, seriously cripple one of the Asian giants were they to grow belligerent, seek to coerce Australia or to strike at vital Australian interests.

If these are the sorts of options that Australian governments will wish to have available in the rather different strategic environment anticipated for 2025-2050, then a rather different force structure may be needed. One such alternative might be called a Flexible Deterrent Option.

This Flexible Deterrent Option would still have the capacity to conduct most of the categories of operation on which Australian forces have been engaged in recent years; peacekeeping in the South Pacific, commitments to operations with close partners against international terrorism, etc. But it would have one major difference. It would contain a careful mix of capabilities that could, *in extremis*, 'rip an arm off' any major Asian power that sought to attack Australia.

This Flexible Deterrent Option would be designed to cause even the most powerful Asian giant to pause for thought, and would have capacities to deter coercion and major conventional and even chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear attacks.

What force structure elements might deliver such offensive deterrence? Let me suggest that an optimal Flexible Deterrent force structure might have *one or two* of the following key capabilities, though probably not all:

- Exceptional strategic and operational ISR capabilities not only regionally but globally;
- Very strong air defence and medium/long-range air strike capabilities with hardened base and support facilities. This might require 300-400 JSF equivalents together with 30-40 aerial tankers, etc.;
- A very strong and well-crewed submarine force—possibly numbering 20-30 boats;
- Exceptional cyber attack and cyber defence capabilities; and
- A moderately capable ballistic missile defence capability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article is not suggesting a future force structure for Australia that possesses all of these elements, but rather one with 2-3 of these optional components. In other words, one possibility could be a force structure that was exceptionally strong in ISR and air combat capability. Another possibility is a force structure that was exceptionally strong with ISR and submarine forces. A third option might combine exceptionally strong air combat forces with cyber warfare capabilities.

Adoption of one of these types of Flexible Deterrent options would mean that some current capabilities may need to be de-emphasised.

There would also need to be a substantial change in the way that the ADF raises, trains and maintains uniformed personnel. There would, for instance, need to be far stronger emphasis given to key categories of fully trained reserve personnel who could be called to the colours in a major crisis to crew those offensive deterrent capabilities that are selected—be they greatly expanded air combat, submarine, cyber or other forces. A substantial proportion of these offensive deterrent capabilities could be held in semi-reserve status until required. Few would normally be operated in normal peacetime circumstances but they would be mobilised for periodic exercises and, in the event of a serious crisis, they could be operated at high rates of tempo for a considerable period.

Such an approach would not necessarily require a dramatically expanded defence budget. It would, however, need a markedly different pattern of defence resource allocation in order to bring the new model into being.

One key conclusion emerges from this discussion. Australia's defence planners need to think creatively about the requirements of walking safely amongst giants in the 2025-2050 timeframe. Precisely how this will best be done will require innovative thinking and careful analysis.

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