
The Defence White Paper 2009 and Australia's Maritime Capabilities

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This article examines some key features of the Defence White Paper 2009 and looks at the projected maritime components of *Force 2030*, concluding that the government has made a sensible commitment to maintaining the strength of Australia's maritime capabilities and building up their capacity. At the same time, there are some significant hurdles to be crossed, even in the next five years, if these projections are to be realized. The community will be able to gauge the government's performance in managing our defence in the next Defence White Paper, to be released in 2014.

The Defence White Paper delivered publically by the Rudd Government on 2 May 2009 has built on a succession of White Papers that have tried to forecast Australia's defence capability requirements in light of current and prospective strategic assessments, within an affordable funding profile. This particular White Paper was produced nearly nine years after its predecessor. This seems in keeping with the practice of previous governments, which have seen the need to undertake this kind of work at the 8-10 year timeframe.

In spite of a great deal of rhetoric about the special significance of this particular effort, in my opinion, this White Paper shares a great deal of the fundamentals with its predecessors: a focus for priority on defence of Australia; recognition of the importance of controlling the maritime approaches to Australia; and the use of our relatively limited capabilities to operate in coalition operations at length from Australia when this is assessed to be in the nation's interests.

The Prime Minister launched the paper from the deck of HMAS STUART berthed in Sydney's Fleet Base, in a break with the custom of releasing the Defence White Paper in the Parliament. This unusual action implies that this White Paper is particularly good for the Navy. I intend to explore this proposition in this article, as well as looking at a few other interesting aspects of the Rudd Government's approach to defence planning.

What is Different about this White Paper?

There are many minor differences between the language in this White Paper and the White Paper produced in 2000 by the Howard Government. I do not think that there would be much interest in exploring these shades of nuance,

and want to set these aside to focus on what I believe to be the main differences.

The first particularly striking difference is the outlook of the work. Whereas in *Defence 2000* the government took ten years as its main planning horizon, and then added a generalized look at the subsequent ten years for planning purposes, in this Defence White Paper 2009 the Rudd Government has projected out 21 years to describe *Force 2030* as the kind of joint force Australia ought to have in that year and somewhat beyond. This is a major break with past practice.

In *Defence 2000*, the Defence White Paper gave the appearance of being relatively certain about the capability needs of the defence force for the next ten years, but beyond that period it was very less certain about particular requirements. Moreover, in recent history we know that the Howard Government used other devices, such as 'defence updates' and 'defence statements' to announce major changes to the force structure and other initiatives. By these actions, questions often arose about the relevance of *Defence 2000* to Australia's needs at the time. I see this as an incrementalist approach to defence planning. It looks like defence planning on the fly. This is unfortunate, because a major function of a Defence White Paper should be to explain the rationale for government's decisions about setting priorities, through defining the nature of new and enhanced capabilities needed for the defence force, and the kind of expenditure needed to support it.

The new approach with a longer time frame makes a great deal of sense. For example, using present processes it takes from 15 to 20 years of work to acquire key capabilities, especially for our air and naval forces, where new technology plays such a pivotal part. There seems to be little prospect of changing the dimensions of this driver in the absence of a serious deterioration in Australia's strategic circumstances, or because of the lack of willingness to implement acquisition strategies designed to cut critical long lead times in half.

The second striking difference between the 2009 White Paper and its predecessor is the commitment by government to produce another White Paper in 5 years time, and to go on producing further White Papers on a five year cycle.¹ This is a bold initiative, and one that offers many benefits if followed through comprehensively. It also complements the decision to use a planning horizon of 21 years.

On a five year rolling cycle for Defence White Papers, no one paper would be immutable when it tries to address our needs well out into the future.

¹ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), para. 13.12-16.

This approach enables a quite different emphasis to be placed on the importance of individual White Papers. It has the potential to do away with incrementalism in our planning, and it could restore the centrality of the White Paper process to guide decision making. A five year cycle will also permit an examination of government's performance over the previous five years in delivering what was promised. It will, of course, elucidate changes to our strategic circumstances and calibrate our responses to those changes, drawing on extant plans as well as delivering new requirements before making adjustments to the investment profile.

In short, the five year White Paper cycle is to be applauded as a way of dealing with the inherent uncertainty of defence planning, though it does come with some additional cost, perhaps even politically. It also means that the White Paper needs to be a comprehensive document in spelling out new capability requirements and how these judgments drive portfolio funding requirements and industry development. I look forward to the next White Paper, which by my reckoning will come forward in 2014—under a different defence minister, and a new defence team.

I will also look forward to reading the government's assessment of its own performance in meeting the milestones set out in this 2009 White Paper. For example, in 2014 the contract for the construction of the future submarine will have to be signed, if the predicated milestones are to be met. As well, I will be very interested to learn about the successes achieved in meeting the savings targets that are part of the government's strategy needed to fund the investment program of the current White Paper. To achieve these outcomes will require leadership of the highest order.

The final major difference in this new Defence White Paper is the absence of any detailed funding measures, other than a commitment to a major investment program to be funded through a combination of greater allocations by governments, and redirection of existing funding to other priorities through savings measures. This is exceedingly disappointing because it seriously undermines the centrality of the White Paper in guiding decision making, and the purpose of the quinquennial approach for writing Defence White Papers.

Maritime Capability Decisions

SUBMARINES

In this White Paper, the government has unveiled plans to build a new class of submarine—the Future Submarine—with capabilities that are much improved over those of the Collins class submarine. These enhanced capabilities will include a submarine-launched long range strike capability, which, in a limited sense, can be seen as a part substitute for the present long-range strike capability afforded by the F-111 aircraft.

The future submarine is to be conventionally powered, although the White Paper does not deal fully with argument as to why a nuclear powered submarine could not more satisfactorily meet Australian requirements for long range and speed in our strategic environment.² These arguments would be important to underpin the judgments to be made about the submarine fleet size, and what the trade-offs might be between numbers of boats, availability and performance characteristics.

The government plans to acquire a fleet of 12 new submarines. This number would give us the capability to deploy 8 submarines at any one time with the mature fleet. Thus we would greatly enhance our ability to maintain a presence in extended range patrol areas, or operate in many more choke points than now. Nonetheless, the demand for submarine crews to be able to carry out such tasks will place a huge demand on the Navy's personnel support and training systems.

Finally on submarines, the government has made it clear that our submarine building and deep maintenance facilities will be located in South Australia. To deliver these new capability submarines in time to replace the Collins class as these reach end of life, preliminary work to prepare for the signing of the contract in 2014 is a demanding priority already. Without doubt, the new submarine design will be based on the Collins class, which is the only conventional submarine in the world able to meet our current requirements.

SURFACE FLEET

The government has outlined ambitious plans for the Navy's surface fleet. This objective needs to be examined in light of the priority placed on re-emphasising our maritime strategy as the principal basis for building up our *Force 2030* capabilities, and our capability for joint operations.

We might be forgiven for thinking that 'replacement capability syndrome' has been at work here, with the endorsement of the previous government's plans to build three advanced Air Warfare Destroyers (AWD). The case for acquiring a fourth AWD is to remain under review,³ although it seems more compelling now, given the changes in our strategic circumstances. Enhanced capabilities are now to be fitted to the AWD, including the SM-6 very long range surface-to-air missile system coupled with Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) to optimize the ships' anti air warfare capability—noting, too, that we will examine the fitment of CEC into the airborne early warning and control aircraft to enhance our maritime capabilities even more.⁴ This plan looks like a "DDG replacement" for our front line destroyer force, with a "second eleven" ship needed to fill out the

² Ibid., para. 9.5.

³ Ibid., para. 9.12.

⁴ Ibid., para. 9.11.

numbers of surface ships needed for all the maritime tasks we may need to undertake.

Recognizing the need to do something about ship numbers with the retirement of the FFGs from service and the ANZAC class reaching end-of-life within the planning period, the government is planning to build eight 'Future Frigates' that will have an emphasis on capabilities for submarine detection and response operations. These ships are to be fitted with a sonar suite that integrates a long range towed-array sonar with a ship's fit that enables anti-torpedo protection and close in submarine detection. In addition, these ships will be able to embark a combination of naval combat helicopters and maritime Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs),⁵ although there will inevitably be questions about the extent of afloat support that each ship can provide for these aviation assets over an extended period.

My difficulty with these plans for the surface fleet stems from the appreciation that the deployment of a "first class" AWD—optimized for anti-air warfare—supported by some "second class" frigates—optimized for anti-submarine warfare (ASW)—into an area of operations where Australia intends to exercise sea control could pose very serious impediments to our flexibility in responding to significant maritime threats. Why is it not possible for us to produce a fleet of 12 first rate ships—optimized for anti-air and anti-submarine warfare—through the use of a pipeline production process, to give operational commanders the flexibility they may need in our new strategic circumstances?

Finally, the government plans to rationalize Navy's patrol boat, mine countermeasures, and hydrographic and oceanographic forces by acquiring a single, modular, multi-role ship in a new class, yet to be specified. There are to be about 20 ships in the program, and generically these ships will be called the off-shore combatant vessel. Right now it is intended that these ships will be larger than the present Armidale class patrol boats, with a possible displacement of about 2000 tonnes.⁶

This plan calls to mind the commissioning on 8 November 2008 of the US Navy's first Littoral Combat Ship, USS FREEDOM. These new concept ships of the US Navy have some interesting characteristics that ought to have a serious impact on our plans for the off-shore combatant vessel. The main characteristics of the USS FREEDOM are: 3089 tons displacement, speed 45 knots, range 3500 nautical miles at 18 knots, shallow draught, complement of 50, and armed with self defence missiles, a gun and a modern sophisticated countermeasures suite.⁷ The modular construction of this vessel enables it to be fitted with special equipment packages that can

⁵ Ibid., para. 9.13.

⁶ Ibid., para. 9.19-22.

⁷ See <<http://www.ussfreedom.org/freedom-facts>> [Accessed 18 June 2009].

tailor ship capabilities to mission specific requirements. What is very attractive about this ship, to my mind, is the much higher available speed than anything else we have planned in our inventory. I think that we need to think carefully about speed and endurance when we specify our requirements for all our future ships.

Without doubt, the acquisition of about 20 ships with similar characteristics would significantly enhance our ability to undertake the range of tasks envisaged for the off-shore combatant vessel, although it remains to be seen how effective and efficient a modular vessel can be in replacing highly specialized craft, especially in the area of mine countermeasures, which, surely, is a priority.

NAVAL AVIATION

A priority has been placed by the government on the acquisition of at least 24 new naval combat helicopters, intended to deliver an operational capability of at least eight aircraft at sea at any one time. It is foreseen that these aircraft will be used to complement ship-borne ASW capabilities, using a dunking sonar and possessing the capability to deliver ASW torpedoes, which will enable them to attack hostile submarines at extended range. In addition, these aircraft will have an air-to-surface missile capability for force and self defence against hostile surface targets.⁸

There has also been recognition of the fundamental requirement for helicopter operations in a utility role. For too long, this task has been undertaken with converted marine helicopters, such as the Sea King, and undoubtedly the need to act quickly has been hastened by the failure of the Sea Sprite helicopter project. The government envisages the acquisition of 46 new MRH-90 helicopters as a pool fleet to meet Navy and Army needs. These helicopters will enter naval service in 2010, with six allocated to the fleet. Of the remaining 40 aircraft, 13 will be allocated to Navy on a share basis for training and Army will operate the remainder.⁹

This multi-role helicopter is intended to offer an advanced and flexible capability for a small joint force like Australia's because of its adaptability for land and maritime work and economies of scale through operation of a common type in numbers. It will have an identical navy/army multi-role application, including the conduct of some ASW and anti-surface warfare missions, as well as important flexibility in amphibious operations through ship-to-shore and shore based operations. Through advanced electronics and composite construction, the lift capability enables the ferrying of greater numbers of personnel and/or more freight, using a ramp for access to the cabin that can hold over 2500kgs in weight. This helicopter also has folding main blades and a folding tail boom assembly, which means that it will be

⁸ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 9.16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 9.17.

possible to optimise the use of deck space in a ship. It will also be optimised for operations in difficult weather conditions, possessing forward looking infrared sensors and a weather radar, and the ability to fly using night vision equipments and a head up display.

MARITIME PATROL AIRCRAFT

The requirement to maintain maritime patrol aircraft for surveillance and response has been acknowledged in the White Paper. The government has decided that the AP-3C Orion aircraft should be replaced with eight more capable manned aircraft and seven large high altitude, long endurance UAVs acquired to supplement the work of maritime patrol aircraft. Although these capabilities will be operated by the Air Force they are, nonetheless, a vital component of the joint force in the conduct of maritime operations. The capabilities of the replacement for the Orions envisage substantial enhancements, such as: air-to-air refuelling, higher transit speeds, highly advanced surface search radar, as well as optical, infra-red and electronic surveillance suites. The aircraft will also be able to air launch ASW torpedoes, and, when upgraded, stand-off anti-ship missiles. When priorities dictate,¹⁰ UAVs and manned patrol aircraft will at last enable us to maintain a persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability in several locations.

AMPHIBIOUS SHIPS

The government intends to proceed with the acquisition of the new LHD amphibious landing ships, due to enter service within 10 years. In addition, this White Paper spells out the need to support amphibious operations through the acquisition of a new sea lift ship, having a displacement of between 10,000 to 15,000 tonnes, and six new heavy landing craft that will add substantial flexibility to our overall capability for operations by transporting armoured vehicles, trucks and stores and people in short term lift tasks within an areas of operations. Our LHDs will be supported in the operations area by the sea lift ship, thus enabling force sustainment in the area for a much longer period of time.¹¹

These plans will give Australia a significant amphibious deployment capability to complement our other means of deploying into an operational area off shore. They seem commensurate with assessments about the kinds of tasks we may want to undertake, but they also bring into sharp focus questions about the self protection of the amphibious fleet on operational deployment. Protection of an amphibious task force will be a serious concern to our operational commanders, with flow on implications for the arming of our amphibious ships (for self defence at least) and the flexibility of our surface fleet and air capabilities in meeting concurrent operational requirements.

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 9.69-70.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.23-25.

AFLOAT SUPPORT FOR THE FLEET

Resupply of deployed ships is a critical operational imperative in a country with our geo-strategic circumstances. This has been recognized by government through the plan to replace HMAS SUCCESS by the end of the next decade.¹²

What Does this Maritime Force Mean?

There may be argument about what this force would be able to contribute to all the possible missions that government might require Australia to undertake in 2030. I am certain that while the maritime force projected in this White Paper is adequate for the foreseeable tasks now, there will be significant changes in scope and capability to be brought forward in the next White Paper.

I am equally sure that, within the context of five yearly reviews of our joint force requirements, this White Paper represents a very good start. But it is only a start, and there is much to be done to deliver the outcomes required, for example with the timings of future submarine force, a final decision on the fourth AWD, and self protection of the amphibious force. A major concern that will have to be watched is the planned acquisition of the future frigate force, which will consist of ships that are not fully capable—compared to the AWDs. With only a total of three AWDs in the fleet, this lack of first rate ships may inhibit our ability to operate in more than two locations at a time, depending on circumstances.

A second area of concern is funding, which the White Paper only deals with in a page and one half at the end, in broad brush statements of average percentage growth to the budget, and imperatives about savings (or cost redirections) intended to balance the books. This is a serious criticism of this White Paper that needs early rectification.

A third area of concern remains the prospect that we will be able to attract and retain suitably experienced personnel to successfully operate the ships and aircraft we plan to acquire. I do not read anything in this White Paper that suggests that we have resolved the problem of how to make up on our perennial personnel shortfalls, which will be exacerbated by the introduction into service of more ships and aircraft. Rather, even in addressing today's persistent Navy needs to deal with current structural hollowness,¹³ we are not offered anything new to persuade me that we have anything more to offer over past initiatives that relied on "market forces" and adjustments to conditions of service to make sea service attractive.

¹² Ibid., 9.26.

¹³ Ibid., para. 14.6.

Undoubtedly, we plan to continue competing in the market for high quality personnel, and I would argue that current economic conditions should make service in the ADF more attractive than at any time I can remember. This means that we ought to expect to be able to solve all our short fall problems in personnel over the next 18 months or so. If we cannot restore our personnel numbers, then we must assume that we have a very deep problem in attracting suitable people in our community to join the ADF. I appreciate that the Chief of Navy has launched a program titled the 'New Generation Navy' to attempt to build up the Navy, and I hope that he is successful.

The White Paper has stated that we will extend the defence force to 57,800 military personnel in the next ten years. Moreover, this force is to be supported by a civilian and contractor force of 21,900 people, and these numbers take no account of reservists. This is a modest increase in overall numbers from the existing force, which numbered 53,167 military and 15,087 civilian personnel in 2008. But against this requirement for an overall increase of about 11,500 people, we have to take account of shifting dynamics in the Australian population, and the consequences for the available pool of people to join the effort, especially towards the latter part of this period.

Conclusion

The government has stated that it wants to build a more potent defence force with a significant focus on enhancing Australia's maritime capabilities. The force has to be able to deter and defeat attacks on Australia, as well as contributing to stability and security in the South Pacific and East Timor, and to military contingencies in the Asia Pacific. The plans outlined for the investment in naval and maritime air forces outlined in the Defence White Paper 2009 seem a sound beginning for achieving this outcome. But there will be some serious obstacles to be overcome, particularly in funding, and the recruitment and retention of the people needed to operate the naval component of the force.

The adoption of a quinquennial approach for writing Defence White Papers offers a more sound way of measuring performance, and retaining sufficient flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances. I also hope that the next White Paper is not undermined by the absence of a serious treatment of the funding envelopes needed to achieve the capability enhancements judged necessary for the ADF. I look forward especially to reading the next White Paper in 2014 to see how well we have done!

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