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# Is the US Alliance of Declining Importance to Australia?

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This White Paper, like all its predecessors, stresses the central importance of the US alliance. However, it is not so certain about the continuation of US strategic primacy or of the US commitment to the security of the Asia-Pacific region. But it does contemplate committing Australia to providing 'substantial contributions' to contingencies in Asia involving the US fighting a major power adversary. And it also acknowledges this might involve Australia facing direct military attacks from a major power. This is a potentially dangerous new departure for Australian defence policy that requires much more public debate.

Like all previous Defence White Papers, the 2009 Defence White Paper stresses the importance of the US alliance to Australia's security. It states that the United States will remain the dominant world power out to 2030 and that the continued US presence in the Pacific will be critical to the stability of the region. But it goes on to argue that the rise of China means that country will become the strongest Asian power with considerable military capabilities. The implication here is that America's power is in relative decline, something that Prime Minister Rudd has observed in earlier speeches.<sup>1</sup> The White Paper is careful with its words but it talks about the potential for the contraction of the US strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region and the primacy of the United States being increasingly tested as other powers rise.<sup>2</sup>

This is the first time in any Australian Defence White Paper that questions have been raised in this way about the dominance of US power.<sup>3</sup> Even at the height of the military power of the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when some in Washington believed that the Soviet Union was about to outstrip the United States in military power, such sentiments were eschewed in Australian Defence White Papers.

The discussion in the 2009 White Paper about the future of US power in the Asia-Pacific region explores what this might mean for Australia's defence posture in ways that begin to raise unsettling questions about Canberra's attitudes to the United States. Or at least, that is the way it risks being

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Rudd, Address to the RSL National Congress, Townsville, 9 September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), pp 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> The 1994 Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia*, predicted—incorrectly—that the US "will neither seek nor accept primary responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the region", but it also said that the US would remain the strongest global power. Department of Defence, *Defending Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994), p. 8.

interpreted. Part of the problem lies with the style of this document, which reads more like a public discussion paper that canvases options than an unambiguous statement of the government's defence policy.

## **What the White Paper Says About the US Alliance**

Unusually for a Defence White Paper, there is only a passing reference to the US alliance in the executive summary of the 2009 version. There it is stated that Australia needs to meet its alliance obligations "as determined by the Australian Government at the time."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the 2000 Defence White Paper's executive summary described the US alliance as "a key strategic asset that will support our bilateral, regional and global interests over the next decade and beyond."<sup>5</sup> Over three weeks after the Defence White Paper was released, the guide to the White Paper called the alliance "vital to Australia's overall Defence Policy".<sup>6</sup> However, such unambiguous words are absent from the Executive Summary of the paper itself.

### **US STRATEGIC PRIMACY**

What does the main body of the Defence White Paper have to say specifically about the US alliance and how does this compare with previous documents? When it addresses US strategic primacy, the White Paper is at pains to stress that the "United States will remain the most powerful and influential strategic actor over the period to 2030—politically, economically and militarily". It argues that US "strategic primacy will assist in the maintenance of a stable global strategic environment", and that "no other power will have the military, economic or strategic capacity to challenge US global primacy over the period covered by this White Paper".<sup>7</sup> Furthermore,

While the United States will maintain the capability to project force globally from its own territory, it will likely continue to judge that its forward deployed forces, including in the Western Pacific and the Middle East, provide reassurance to allies ... as well as providing operational flexibility in crises.<sup>8</sup>

This section is followed with one that deals with the likelihood of increasing tensions between the major powers of the region. It observes that

As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation [and] a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation ...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p 13.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), p. x.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defence, *Your Guide to the 2009 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

It observes were Japan unable to rely on the US alliance, its strategic outlook would be dramatically different, "and it would be compelled to re-examine its strategic posture and capabilities." When it comes to examine the strategic implications of the rise of China, the White Paper cannot make its mind up whether China will overtake the United States as the world's largest economy around 2020 or whether—based on other measures—the US economy is likely to remain paramount.<sup>10</sup> And there the matter is left hanging.

The White Paper does acknowledge that

In circumstances where a global transformation in economic power and commensurate redistribution of strategic power continued to the point where its cumulative effect required [Australia] to alter [its] assumptions about... US strategic primacy, the planning assumptions underpinning this White Paper would require fundamental reassessment.<sup>11</sup>

But the section on the global economic crisis is disappointing. It observes that the world is

facing the most serious global economic and financial crisis in decades [and that] it is possible that we could see significant shifts in relative economic power between nations over time.<sup>12</sup>

However, nowhere does it concede that this crisis has already damaged America's reputation for global economic leadership and enhanced the relative standing of China.

Admittedly, such a relative shift will depend very much on how long the crisis goes on but, arguably, some damage has already been done to the United States. A former US Deputy Treasury Secretary argues that the financial crisis is a geopolitical setback that has stripped Washington of the resources and credibility it needs to maintain its role in global affairs. And the US Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, has told the US Congress the economic crisis is now a bigger threat to US national security than the Al Qaeda terrorist network or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>13</sup> The White Paper does accept that any future that might see a contraction of US strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region would adversely affect Australian interests. But it really needed to be more incisive in its analysis of how changes in economic power can affect the distribution of strategic power.

Elsewhere in the White Paper, it is stated that "Of particular concern would be any diminution in the willingness or capacity of the United States to act as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Both quoted in Paul Dibb and Geoffrey Barker, 'A Dangerously Interconnected World', *The Australian Financial Review*, 21-22 March 2009.

a stabilising force".<sup>14</sup> Why raise such an issue if that is not deemed to be a likely possibility? And, as already remarked, why state that "Any future that might see a potential contraction of US strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region ... would adversely affect Australian interests",<sup>15</sup> unless you think that might well happen? Is an end to US strategic primacy in the Pacific being predicted here? In contrast, a more sensible cautionary note in the White Paper is the one that remarks that

the United States might find itself preoccupied and stretched in some parts of the world such that its ability to shift attention and project power into other regions, when it needs to, is constrained. This is likely to cause the United States to seek active assistance from regional allies and partners, including Australia ...<sup>16</sup>

### **THE US ALLIANCE**

The main section on the US alliance itself describes it as "our most important defence relationship" and that the alliance relationship "is an integral element of our strategic posture".<sup>17</sup> This comes only after over 90 pages. Compare this with the Howard Government's more lavish language in its 2000 Defence White Paper, which described the ANZUS Treaty as "the foundation of a relationship that is one of our great national assets" and the US-Australia Alliance as being "as important to both parties today as it has ever been."<sup>18</sup>

Like the 2000 Defence White Paper, the Rudd Government's document stresses that the alliance gives Australia

significant access to materiel, intelligence, research and development, communications systems, and skills and expertise that substantially strengthen the ADF [Australian Defence Force]. ... Without access to US capabilities, technology, and training, the ADF simply could not be the advanced force that it is today, and must be in the future, without the expenditure of considerable more money.<sup>19</sup>

The 2009 Defence White Paper also uses very similar language to that of the 2000 White Paper with regard to mutual undertakings to support each other in time of need, which does not commit either Australia or the United States in advance to specific types of military action, but which does provide clear expectations of support.<sup>20</sup>

Like its Howard Government predecessor, the 2009 Defence White Paper sets out in some detail the specific areas of cooperation in intelligence,

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<sup>14</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the wording in *Defence 2000*, p. 35 (para.. 5.13) with *Force 2030*, p. 94 (para.. 11.6).

technical and military co-operation, as well as such issues as strategic planning and war gaming, combined operational planning, missile defence and space situational awareness, research, development, test and evaluation, and logistics and materiel support. It is noteworthy in this regard that both the Howard and Rudd Governments have sought to demonstrate just how the alliance relationship is getting ever closer.

Where the Rudd Government's Defence White Paper differs from that of its predecessor is that it provides a separate section on the joint facilities. It confirms a central role is the provision of ballistic missile early warning and monitoring of compliance with arms control and disarmament agreements. The Howard Government made no mention of these facilities in its White Paper, whereas its Labor Government predecessors in 1987 and 1994 dedicated two pages to them.<sup>21</sup> The role of the joint facilities has always been more sensitive for Labor governments than for those of the Coalition. The White Paper reasserts the key policy with regard to the joint facilities developed by the previous Labor Government in the late 1980s of Australia's requirement for "full knowledge and concurrence." For the first time, however, it is noted that any future proposal for hosting similar facilities "will have to meet the same standards."<sup>22</sup>

One unnecessary awkwardness of note is the statement that where "the interests of Australia and the United States align, we should also continue to support the United States in maintaining global security", but that this "does not mean unconditional support for all the policies of the United States."<sup>23</sup> And the awkwardness is further reinforced by statements such as: "The Government will always weigh up very carefully any request to send the ADF to fight alongside the armed forces of the United States" but it "would always reserve the right to take a decision based on prevailing circumstances at the time."<sup>24</sup> And then the point is hammered home yet again by saying that

we must never put ourselves in a position where the price of our own security is a requirement to put Australian troops at risk in distant theatres of war where we have no direct interest at stake.<sup>25</sup>

Many would see this as an unnecessarily provocative and self-evident statement. Why put it in a Defence White Paper?

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<sup>21</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1987), pp. 10-12, and Department of Defence, *Defending Australia*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* See also the reference at page 56 to the fact that it is not a principal task for the ADF to be generally prepared to deploy to the Middle East in circumstances where it has to engage in ground operations against heavily armed adversaries located in crowded urban environments.

## THE ALLIANCE AND AUSTRALIA'S DEFENCE

This section of the 2009 Defence White Paper starts off conventionally enough by stressing what all previous Defence White Papers have done: defence self-reliance means that Australia would only expect the United States to come to its aid in circumstances where it was under threat from a major power. Short of that situation, the United States would reasonably expect Australia to defend itself. This has been a long-held tenet of Australian defence policy and the Defence White Papers in 1987, 1994 and 2000 express precisely the same sentiments.<sup>26</sup> It does not mean self-sufficiency, but it does reflect the fact that any self-respecting middle power like Australia should be able to defend itself short of attack from a major power. Or, as the current White Paper puts it, failure to do so would be “an irresponsible abrogation of Australia’s strategic sovereignty”.<sup>27</sup>

Also like its predecessors, the 2009 document confirms the value to Australia of the protection afforded by extended nuclear deterrence under the US alliance.<sup>28</sup> However, it goes on to state something that is new:

That protection provides a stable and reliable sense of assurance and has over the years removed the need for Australia to consider more significant and expensive defence options.<sup>29</sup>

This may well be taken by some regional countries as a clumsy allusion to an Australian nuclear weapon option, and is simply unnecessary as it has no prospect of becoming policy under any Australian government.

In a paragraph that has not received the attention it deserves, it is recognised that in making substantial contributions to contingencies involving conventional combat in the Asia-Pacific Region (including meeting “our alliance obligations to the United States as determined by the Australian Government at the time”), Australia would

need to take into account our local defence needs in the event of retaliatory action being taken against us, which could not be ruled out if we are engaged in combat operations or if we are providing basing, sustainment and other support for allies and partners.<sup>30</sup>

The White Paper goes on to identify the following potential threats to Australia in these circumstances, which include:

missile strike, air attack, or special forces raids against Australian territory or offshore facilities; mining of our ports and maritime choke points; threats to or harassment of critical shipping between Australia and its trade partners;

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<sup>26</sup> See Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, p. 3, *Defending Australia*, p. 96, and *Defence 2000*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, p. 36, and *Force 2030*, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

hostile submarine operations in our approaches and our waters; and cyber attacks on our defence, government and possibly civil information networks, among other threats.<sup>31</sup>

The White Paper observes that current defence planning does not assume that Australia would be involved in such a conflict on its own. Nevertheless, "in such a circumstance, the ADF needs to hold sufficient forces in and around Australia at heightened levels of readiness to meet such threats."<sup>32</sup> This is a quite remarkable insight into Australia's new defence thinking and how far it proposes to go in building up its conventional war fighting capability in support of its US ally, and thereby risking direct military threats from a major power adversary against itself.

### **Implications for Future Policy Options**

The picture presented in this analysis of how the new Defence White Paper treats Australia's critical alliance with the United States is a mixed bag. As with all its predecessors, it clearly recognizes the central importance of the alliance to Australia's defence posture and planning. But it is less fulsome than previous White Papers with the words it uses to describe just how important the alliance is to us. Of particular note is the restrained language used in the Executive Summary, and the fact that it was not until page 32 that US strategic primacy is addressed, and then in a qualified way. And it is not until two thirds of the way through the Defence White Paper that our alliance with the United States is described as "our most important defence relationship" and as "an integral element of our strategic posture".<sup>33</sup> Now, not too much should be made of the presentational order in which important subjects appear in the White Paper, but it was perhaps no coincidence that the Minister for Defence felt compelled to set the record straight and describe the alliance as "an indispensable element of Australia's security" in a press release on the day the White Paper was launched by the Prime Minister.<sup>34</sup>

Much more than any of its predecessors in the last 30 years or more, this White Paper chooses to present a puzzling mixture of the positives and negatives of the US alliance—as it does with many other important defence policy subjects. This raises unnecessary propositions (for example, Australia's nuclear weapon option) and has already drawn a firm response from the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, about America's continuing commitment to the security of the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the White Paper quite unnecessarily expresses the government's opposition "to the development of a unilateral national missile defence system by any nation",<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> 'The Australian-United States Alliance', Press Release, Minister for Defence, 2 May 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 85.

and thereby put itself clearly at odds with both the United States and Japan, Australia's two most important allies in the Asia-Pacific region. And yet at the same time the White Paper acknowledges Australia will explore the development of capabilities for in-theatre missile defence “of ADF elements and the defence of other strategic interests—including our population centres and key infrastructure.”<sup>36</sup>

There are three important policy considerations that arise from the analysis of the US alliance in this Defence White Paper. In their different ways, they importantly affect—and in some ways limit—Australia's defence policy options and the resources to be allocated to alliance endeavours.

### **SELF-RELIANCE**

First, there is the requirement in an increasingly multi-polar Asia-Pacific region and some longer term uncertainty surrounding the issue of US strategic primacy for Australia to be more self-reliant in its defence. This reflects policy imperatives first raised in the 1976 Defence White Paper and considerably amplified in the 1987 White Paper.<sup>37</sup> The 2009 Defence White Paper returns to the centre of Australian defence planning the requirement to provide for our own security and the fact that the ability to deter or defeat armed attack on Australia will be the primary force structure determinant of the ADF. This will have a major impact on Australia's future military equipment acquisitions, which will be optimised for the defence of Australia and its approaches and for the ADF's primary operational environment (which extends from the eastern Indian Ocean to the South Pacific and from the equator to the Southern Ocean).<sup>38</sup> The implication here for the alliance is that Australia will become a more powerful military middle power not only in its own self-defence but in an immediate region that is likely to become more unstable: Washington will be able to turn more to Canberra to lead in this part of the world.

### **CAPABILITY EDGE**

Second, this White Paper continues the key defence planning requirement for Australia to have a technological edge when it comes to military capabilities. As the paper puts it, maintaining a capability advantage “makes up for our weaknesses, and reduces the risk of attrition of Australia's limited forces” and, importantly, it “can provide a bulwark against strategic uncertainty”.<sup>39</sup> There is implicit recognition in the White Paper that this will become a more challenging task as the region develops economically and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>37</sup> Self-reliance was first raised definitively in the 1972 *Australian Defence Review*, which was not a White Paper. It said: “self-reliance in situations of less than global or major international concern will lay claim to be a central feature in the future development of Australia's defence policy”. Department of Defence, *Australian Defence Review* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1972), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.66.



can afford more sophisticated military equipment. In particular, it is stated that Australia will require more potent forces in

undersea warfare and anti-submarine warfare (ASW), surface maritime warfare (including air defence at sea), air superiority, strategic strike, special forces, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), and cyber warfare.<sup>40</sup>

The introduction into the region of advanced combat aircraft and submarines and

The ability of some regional military forces to employ such systems will be enhanced by their acquisition of advanced communications, command, computing, ISR and electronic warfare (EW) systems.<sup>41</sup>

is identified in the White Paper. So too, is the capacity over time for more regional militaries to be “able to network a range of weapon systems and develop the operational proficiency to be able to do so in militarily effective ways”.<sup>42</sup> Given Australia’s limited defence industry base, this means that Australia will become more dependent on access to US technologies, which will remain the most potent in the world for a very long time yet.

The Defence White Paper recognises this continuing dependence on the United States for critical technologies. It specifically nominates space-based assets and “some sensitive special technologies” for which Australia will continue to rely on its principal ally, the United States. It states that

the policy of defence self-reliance does not preclude us from relying on a degree of international support in some critical enabling functions such as intelligence and surveillance, communications, space systems, resupply and logistics.

Nor does defence self-reliance mean that we should not accept a degree of dependence on the global supply chain to support the ADF, except in certain areas of defence industry capability which... we might need to be prepared to support in order to retain those capabilities in Australia.<sup>43</sup>

In some areas, such as submarine operational quietness and long-range strategic strike, the advantage from access to US technology will be absolutely essential for Australia’s future force structure. The White Paper confirms that “the prime areas for engagement [with the United States] will be in ISR, cyber warfare, EW, underwater warfare and networked systems.”<sup>44</sup> The transfer of especially sensitive technologies that are likely to give ADF forces a winning edge raises the policy importance of Australia continuing to be treated as a very trusted partner of the United States.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.136.

## MAJOR POWER CONFLICT

The final, and by far most crucial, policy option raised by this Defence White Paper is the one that relates to Australia making a substantial contribution to alliance military operations that involve conventional combat in Asia and, as a result, facing the prospect of a retaliatory attack on Australia itself. The White Paper is careful to stress “it is not a current defence planning assumption that Australia would be involved in such a conflict on its own.”<sup>45</sup> But it does talk, *inter-alia*, about the possibility of missile strikes and air attacks against Australian territory, and hostile submarine operations in our approaches. It concludes that in such a remote scenario, the ADF would need “to hold sufficient forces in and around Australia at heightened levels of readiness to meet such threats.”<sup>46</sup>

While the White Paper talks about “major power adversaries operating in our approaches,”<sup>47</sup> nowhere, of course, does it hazard an opinion about the identity of such an attacking power. However, most of us would believe that the likely candidate has to be China (who actually believes that it could be Japan or India?). We have not in recent decades comprehended as plausible the potential of confrontation with a major power adversary attacking Australia or operating militarily in our approaches, as a consequence of a wider conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. The White Paper now considers such a contingency as “not so remote as to be beyond contemplation”. It claims

the force the Government intends to build gives us an acceptable margin of confidence that hostile military operations in our primary operational environment can be contested effectively by the ADF. This includes circumstances where we have to attend to our local defence needs against a major power adversary in the event of our being involved in a wider conflict, and that substantial costs will be imposed on our adversaries.<sup>48</sup>

These are extraordinary claims. What is left seriously unanswered here is the fact that China is a nuclear power. Are we contemplating Chinese nuclear missile strikes on Australia as the cost of the US alliance under these circumstances? If so, these are potentially existential issues that require a much more rigorous and well-informed debate about the future direction of Australian defence policy.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 55

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 65. It is interesting how this reference on page 65 to the question of major power adversaries occurs separately from the section on page 55 about contributing to military contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 65.