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# The Missing Link: Politics, Strategy and Capability Priorities

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A Defence White Paper needs to provide a clear link between political purpose in the form of strategic interests, and force structure decisions. *Force 2030* tries to do so by (re)introducing the useful concept of warning time, and an operational focus on the defence of Australia to strategic guidance. However, it fails to bring these together into a coherent strategy. Specifically, it does not provide a sufficiently close link between warning and strategic outlook, it fails to justify a military strategy based on sea control, and it maintains an artificial separation of defence policy from Australia's wider regional foreign policy.

The 2009 White Paper lays out how the Rudd Government “plans to strengthen the foundations of Australia's defence so that we are ready to meet the challenges of an uncertain strategic future.”<sup>1</sup> Uncertainty is indeed pervasive in the problem of national defence, and ‘requirements’ to meet an uncertain threat are thus in principle stochastic in nature. But since it is impossible to buy a stochastic number of ships or aircraft, defence planning is always an exercise in risk management—a point so fundamental that the White Paper has rightly devoted a whole chapter to it.<sup>2</sup> This article discusses how the 2009 White Paper bridges the gap between uncertain strategic requirements and inevitably very determinate force structure decisions for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). It begins by discussing the importance of strategy in the task, reviews the approach and decisions in *Force 2030*, and concludes by highlighting three areas for improvement.

## Strategy: From Political Purpose to Military Means

The White Paper is off to a good start when it writes that “the potential use of force by states is why, at the most basic level, armed forces exist.”<sup>3</sup> Any other task that governments use armed forces for in practice, from disaster relief to border protection, could not justify the existence of that very particular institution of the military. The use of force is not an end in itself, however, but ultimately “a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Defence White Paper should provide “the

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), para. 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 2.4, see also 2.19.

<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 99.

bridge that relates military power to political purpose”,<sup>5</sup> in other words, it must provide a strategy to be the framework for its decisions.

In an actual conflict, strategy amounts to “the use of engagements for the object of the war,”<sup>6</sup> as both adversaries try to implement their theory of victory over the opposition of the other.<sup>7</sup> Here, the operational usefulness of any particular capability is paramount. On the face of it, it is an attractive criterion for force structure decisions, as it is amenable to detailed and technical analysis, and often authoritatively defended by those uniformed personnel who are ultimately asked to stake their life on the outcome.

But while decisions on operational matters are never easy, they are far simpler than the wider task of the White Paper. It is not only faced with the uncertainties that affect the successful use of force in any specific conflict, but also by the much greater uncertainties about the circumstances in which Australia might decide, or need, to use force in the first place. Any such decision is a political one, and force structure evaluations outside their political context are thus ultimately meaningless. In other words, it matters much less that the planning scenarios used to derive force structure requirements for *Force 2030* were “hard-edged” or “specifically designed to stretch the ADF ... to the limits of its operating parameters”,<sup>8</sup> than that they were thoroughly grounded in a realistic appreciation of the circumstances in which Australia might engage in military operations in the first place. A close link during a White Paper process between the evaluation of Australia’s strategic outlook and interests on the one hand, and the force structure review on the other, is thus a necessary condition for a good White Paper.

In order to link capability decisions to political purpose, the White Paper has to demonstrate a conceptual fit and coherence between strategic interests, strategic outlook, defence policy, credible minimum warning and defence preparation times, geography, military strategy, and capability decisions. Failure of top-down political guidance to do so does not mean that capability planning does not occur. However, it develops a life of its own, driven by bureaucratic politics within the Defence Force and Department or, at most, considerations of tactical usefulness, bereft of political or operational tenets that could be used to anchor decision criteria.<sup>9</sup> This condition has afflicted

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<sup>5</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Stephan Frühling, ‘Uncertainty, Forecasting and the Difficulty of Strategy,’ *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January-March 2006), pp. 1-13.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 8.31.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas C. Lovelace and Thomas-Durrell Young, *Strategic Plans, Joint Doctrine and Antipodean Insights* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1995).

Tactical usefulness alone can be a valid decision criterion if the way in which government aims to use the defence force is solely to make contributions to coalitions that are politically, rather than militarily, significant. A good White Paper developed on that basis is New Zealand Ministry of Defence and New Zealand Defence Force, *The Defence of New Zealand 1991* (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 1991).

Australian defence in the past,<sup>10</sup> and *Force 2030*'s preventive disavowal of capability proposals outside the regular force structuring process is a laudable departure from recent practice in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

## From Political Purpose to Military Means in *Force 2030*

### STRATEGIC INTERESTS, DEFENCE POLICY AND TASKS FOR THE ADF

*Force 2030* defines four main strategic interests for Australia: First, the "defence of Australia against direct armed attack"; second, "the security, stability and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood", including Indonesia, and the exclusion of hostile powers from that neighbourhood; third, "the stability of the wider Asia-Pacific region", where Australia, due to its geographic location, has "a deep stake in the security of Southeast Asia"; and, fourth, a benign and stable international order at the global level.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of its overall strategic posture, the 2009 White Paper continues the policy of self-reliance in the defence of Australia. It acknowledges the practical benefits from access to US intelligence and technology that flow from the US alliance, on which the government also continues to rely to deter nuclear attack on Australia. In addition, the ADF should have the capacity to lead coalitions where Australia's strategic interests justified such a role, and to make contributions to coalitions in other cases. This posture is also unchanged from past guidance, although qualifications about high-intensity land warfare are made more explicit.<sup>13</sup>

From these considerations flow four tasks for the ADF, namely to "deter and defeat armed attacks on Australia by conducting independent military operations"; to "contribute to stability and security in the South Pacific and East Timor", including by leading coalitions; to

contribute to military contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region, including in relation to assisting our Southeast Asian partners to meet external challenges, and to meeting our alliance obligations to the United States

and, finally, to "contribute to military contingencies in the rest of the world."<sup>14</sup>

The discussion of interests and tasks thus drops the ill-defined intermediate concept of the 'strategic objective' of the *Defence 2000* White Paper. Compared to that document and the *Defence Update 2007*, the importance of the external security of the wider maritime South East Asia seems diminished, although *Force 2030* introduces the freedom of sea lanes of

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1986), pp. 23-30.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 8.73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 5.4-21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 6.1-22, 6.32-34, 6.17, 7.23-25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 7.2-24.

communication in the area as a new explicit concern.<sup>15</sup> *Defence 2000* had identified the stability and security of maritime South East Asia as a separate strategic interest,<sup>16</sup> while the *Update 2007*, which did not include a list of strategic interests, had explicitly included it in the area where Australia had to “lead”, and not merely “contribute”, militarily.<sup>17</sup> However, by realigning the second strategic interest to include Indonesia’s stability and freedom from hostile outside influence, the importance of that country is given more prominence, in a way that is reminiscent of strategic guidance before 2000.

### **STRATEGIC OUTLOOK AND WARNING TIMES**

The White Paper does not see major departures from the overall economic and domestic trajectories of South East Asia, which “should remain largely stable”, or of the South Pacific and East Timor, which “will continue to be beset to some degree by economic stagnation and political and social instability.” Given Australia’s own military capabilities, the White Paper is “confident” that Australia would have at least a decade of warning time of “any attempt by nearby states”, a thinly veiled reference to Indonesia, “to develop the capacity for sustained military operations against us”.<sup>18</sup>

It is in the rise of China and the (relative) decline of US power that *Force 2030* sees the ultimate source of most strategic uncertainty facing Australia, where “many potential strategic scenarios ... could emerge” as “[t]here are likely to be tensions between the major powers of the region ... [and] power relations will inevitably change.” Australia’s security for past decades had been “underwritten by US strategic primacy” and “the planning assumptions underpinning this White Paper” are explicitly conditioned by “our assumptions about the weight and reach of US strategic primacy”. However, what assumptions the White Paper actually makes is far from clear, because it states that “[t]he United States will remain the most powerful and influential strategic actor” on the one hand, while “China will also be the strongest Asian military power, by a considerable margin” on the other. US strategic primacy was now “being transformed as economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power”, and “[r]isks resulting from escalating strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably”.<sup>19</sup>

This imprecision leads to two judgments about the warning time Australia could rely on for having to fight a major power in its own approaches that are difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, the White Paper states that this “is conceivable, over the long period covered by this White Paper”, and that the planned force

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., para. 5.12.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), para. 4.9.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia’s National Security: A Defence Update 2007* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), pp. 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 4.28-37, 3.14-15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., para. 4.12, 4.19, 3.18, 4.14, 4.26, 6.27.

gives us an acceptable margin of confidence that hostile military operations in our primary operational environment can be contested effectively by the ADF

even under these circumstances. On the other hand, it also states that

It is unlikely that contingencies involving major power adversaries could arise in the foreseeable future without a degree of strategic warning [and] in the light of such strategic warning, we might have to adjust our strategic posture and force development plans.<sup>20</sup>

### **MILITARY STRATEGY AND OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS**

As it is in the defence of Australia that the government seeks self-reliance, Australia's military strategy is focused on that task, which the White Paper repeatedly equates with "controlling the air and sea approaches to Australia". It modifies past guidance by emphasizing the 'littoral' as well as maritime nature of these approaches, giving land forces additional roles "to control our approaches" and, more enlighteningly, "potentially to deny the adversary access to staging bases." Also new to strategic guidance are references to the value to Australia of offshore territories and basing rights in projecting military power in Australia's region.<sup>21</sup>

The reduced confidence in strategic stability in Asia has led to a renewed focus on the defence of Australia as a practical operational problem. Defence is explicitly instructed to update its relevant contingency plans "notwithstanding the imperative of managing ongoing operations", not the least as "retaliatory action" against Australia itself "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" in conflicts in the wider Asia-Pacific. The White Paper also specifies that the government does not expect Australia to face a major power adversary in its approaches outside the context of a wider conflict.<sup>22</sup> While Australia does not rely on allied combat troops in the Australian theatre, it thus expects that allied forces in other theatres would bind significant enemy forces. Compared to earlier guidance documents, these clarifications add important nuance to the concept of self-reliance in the context of major conflict, and are important as a basis for judgments about force structure requirements.

### **FORCE STRUCTURE CONCEPTS AND CAPABILITY PRIORITIES**

In line with past strategic guidance, *Force 2030* states that the defence of Australia is "the primary force structure determinant", and that forces designed for that task would provide the basis for ADF contributions to coalition operations. But it does well to highlight the need for the ADF to provide enabling force elements that would allow other countries to participate in Australian-led coalitions, and to be precise that "mission-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., para. 8.45-46, 8.48.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., para. 6.19, 7.2, 5.5., 8.7-8, 7.6, 8.25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., para. 6.41-42, 7.18, 8.45-46.

specific capability enhancements” for coalition operations may be required, but “should not be a means by which the base capability and prescribed performance levels of the ADF are materially changed over time”.<sup>23</sup>

The White Paper states that “as a capability development principle the ADF will acquire fully developed capabilities, which are fully deployable and effective within readiness warning times”. And yet, at the same time, it resurrects the force structure principle of the expansion base to a prominence that it did not have in Australian strategic guidance since, at least, the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper. Extra wiring to be installed on 12 F/A-18F Super Hornets to enable future upgrades to the Growler version brings back the much maligned yet sensible principle of fit-for-not-with.<sup>24</sup> Where *Defence 2000* had explicitly ended Army’s role as an expansion base,<sup>25</sup> that is now again an explicit purpose of the Army reserves. Relatively small investments in space capability assurance, ballistic missile defence and counter-WMD capabilities follow a similar logic.<sup>26</sup> The White Paper’s use of the term ‘hedge’—which it does not define—in this context suggests that it uses it to refer to ‘real options’.<sup>27</sup> Assuming that the government is consistent in its terminology, references to the whole ADF as a ‘hedge’ imply a shift back towards the old idea of the ADF as a ‘core force’. Submarines, fighter aircraft and land forces are, in fact, explicitly mentioned in this regard, and the White Paper also contains vague remarks about additional “future capability options”, and even to “national mobilization”.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the government does not address how these considerations relate to the planning scenarios underlying the force structure review, or how they relate to its capability decisions. As in *Defence 2000*, there is not even a general justification for the numbers of submarines, surface combatants or fighter aircraft *Force 2030* proposes to maintain. The White Paper’s demand that the ADF be able to deploy one brigade and one battalion in the region, as well as another battalion group in pursuit of “wider strategic interests”,<sup>29</sup> also does little to illuminate any analysis that may have led to these numbers.

Ultimately, the government’s justification for its force structure decisions is limited to a very general congruence: between the increased submarine numbers, large new Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) combatants, and new offshore patrol vessels reminiscent of the Dibb Review’s Light Patrol Frigate,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., para. 6.29, 6.37, 8.49-50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., para. 8.62, 9.64.

<sup>25</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, para. 8.10.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 9.34, 8.28, 9.97-98.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Defence Materiel Organization, *Defence Electronics Systems Sector Strategic Plan* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2004), p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 8.34, 3.21, 10.22-23, 9.108-109, 9.9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., para. 10.9.

and its aim of being able to maintain sea control. Joint Strike Fighters and new land attack cruise missiles strengthen Australia's strike capabilities. But given the renewed focus on the defence of Australia, it is surprising that the White Paper does not address at all the feasibility of using a large general purpose vessel for mine countermeasures, the value of fixed hydrophones, or the need for a more robust sea mining capability.

### **Force 2030: A Lack of Explication and Imagination**

In reaction to uncertainty in the strategic outlook, *Force 2030* thus reintroduces into strategic guidance updated and useful concepts of warning time and the defence of Australia. However, three main shortcomings prevent it from achieving coherence in its strategic framework.

#### **WARNING OF WHAT?**

The first of these shortcomings relates to the White Paper's approach to warning and expansion. In principle, this is a sensible response to the pressures on US primacy in the Pacific that the rise of China will bring in coming decades. It is reminiscent of the 'core force' concept of the 1970s, but Australia's current circumstances differ in important ways from that time, which the White Paper should have spelled out in more detail. Warning during the 1970s was to be a two stage process, with a first stage of defence preparations taking place once strategic circumstances deteriorated, while the development of an actual threat would trigger the second stage of expansion.<sup>30</sup> At the time, there was little indication of the manner in which strategic circumstances might deteriorate.

In contrast, *Force 2030's* comments about the rise of Chinese power provide a clear setting of where a direct or indirect threat to Australia might emerge, and the significant increase of Australia's maritime capabilities now planned indeed suggests that a first stage of expansion, in reaction to deteriorating circumstances, is already in train. But *Force 2030* undermines its own, reactive warning logic by presenting a detailed force structure for 21 years from now. Instead, it would have made more sense to develop a document for *Force 2020*, which could have made more explicit and precise the need to revitalize the force and to set in train major procurement programs in, for example, submarine construction. This would have provided an option for expansion, while leaving the exact composition (and size) of the force for future White Papers and governments to decide.

Furthermore, unless a warning concept is precise enough to provide a contestable basis for making decisions, it amounts to little more than strategic rhetoric. Unfortunately, the White Paper does not provide such a basis in its vague comments on US primacy, or its contradictory remarks

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<sup>30</sup> Stephan Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), pp. 30, 34.

about major power adversaries in Australia's approaches. In particular, applying warning time to changing capabilities, rather than changing intentions—which common lore holds as necessary in order to be able to expand in time—has to be critically questioned if the Chinese *capability* to pose a direct threat to Australia may in the future depend on US or ASEAN countries' *intentions* to resist earlier moves that may lead to such a threat developing. Simply flagging the need to revise planning assumptions if judgments about US primacy are changed says little about how likely such a change may be, how it may be detected in advance, and what the consequences would be.

### **THE SELF-SERVING NOTION OF SEA CONTROL**

Warning and expansion considerations in force structure planning require the definition of a 'terminal force' that the force-in-being must be able to expand into—an issue that proved difficult to achieve in the 'core force' planning of the 1970s. Defining at least the outlines of a post-expansion force is impossible without discussing the military strategy such a force would be used to implement. And yet, while *Force 2030* continues a decade-old trend in Australian strategic guidance of increasing ambitions with regards to sea control,<sup>31</sup> it fails to make any link between the strategic outlook, present or future, and that military strategy.

Sea control implies that a country wants to be able to use the sea against the active opposition of its enemy—be it for land attack, amphibious manoeuvre, logistics, or trade. Surface ships are central to sea control as ASW platforms,<sup>32</sup> due to their ability to provide persistent presence, and ultimately because nearly all uses of the sea are performed by surface vessels. In contrast, a strategy of sea denial—which seeks to deny the enemy the use of the sea, without necessarily establishing an ability to use it oneself—can be performed with a combination of aircraft and submarines, with less need for expensive surface vessels. Moreover, operational requirements for the new submarines would be quite different if they were employed primarily for sea denial, or the support of surface task forces.

Sea control is a much more ambitious concept than sea denial. It is a critical shortcoming of the White Paper that it has not addressed the feasibility of that strategy, should US strategic primacy and Australia's strategic circumstances deteriorate even further, because that has direct consequences for the shape of a future expanded force. But even for situations short of that development, *Force 2030* does not deliver the explanation promised in paragraph 6.29 of the purpose of Australian sea control.

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<sup>31</sup> Stephan Frühling, 'Golden Window of Opportunity: A New Maritime Strategy and Force Structure for the Australian Navy', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 81-88.

<sup>32</sup> Although ASW off, for example, the approaches to Sydney Harbor does not require frigates, and could instead be performed by auxiliary vessels.

The White Paper makes reference to the protection of trade in the Indian Ocean and, in particular, South East Asia.<sup>33</sup> This takes up a concern voiced by the Prime Minister in his 2008 Townsville speech,<sup>34</sup> but receives little supporting analysis in the document. If a South East Asian country was interfering with trade, it is hard to see why the government would not rely on re-routing of ships and pressure by Australia's major trading partners, China, Japan, and the United States. If China attacked Australia's trade with North Asia, shipping losses could again be limited by re-routing, and lost trade would in any case be a much lesser worry for Australia than the outcome of the conflict overall. As to the country that will be Australia's biggest trading partner within the time considered in the White Paper, China, one would assume that the government does not mean to imply that the RAN would fight a way for Australian ore through an allied blockade. Hence, if trade protection is a driver for the strengthening of Australian ASW capabilities and sea control, much more specific political and geographic context is required, with particular reference to the defence of Australia and its Northern ports, to make a convincing case that would justify the expenditure involved.

Finally, the White Paper does not at all address how its comments about avoiding large numbers of casualties, or about the need for cost-effective capability, are compatible with the use of land forces for 'amphibious manoeuvre' or denying the enemy staging bases—another possible use of sea control.<sup>35</sup> Australia's own experience at Kokoda and Gallipoli demonstrates the importance of preventing enemy reinforcements in such operations, but if that condition (of sea denial) is achieved, there is little reason to engage on land. The isolation of Rabaul was ultimately a much greater triumph of allied strategy in the South West Pacific than either Kokoda or Guadalcanal, and the battle of the Coral Sea was far more important for Australia's strategic situation in 1942 than control of any ridgeline in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

### **A LACK OF STRATEGIC POLICY**

Behind this cursory and superficial treatment of trade protection and amphibious manoeuvre lies a third, more fundamental shortcoming, as the White Paper discusses them completely divorced from wider foreign policy concerns. If Australia is now proposing to develop forces able to fight for sea lanes in South East Asia, to use its army to deny the enemy bases in Indonesia or the South Pacific, or signals that a fight against a major power operating in its approaches is "is conceivable, over the long period covered by this White Paper", then the document must provide more on what this means for Australia's relationships with ASEAN countries, and Indonesia in particular, than the few bland paragraphs it has on offer.<sup>36</sup> South East Asia's

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<sup>33</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 6.43, 5.12.

<sup>34</sup> Kevin Rudd, Address to the RSL National Congress, Townsville, 9 September 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 7.5, 7.6, 8.20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 8.45, 11.21-26.

alignment and posture are crucial if Australia sees a direct or indirect threat from a mainland power, but the White Paper has nothing substantial to say about the strategic pressures that these countries will be facing in the next decades, let alone how Australia's foreign, trade, and defence policies must interact and be coordinated to increase their role as bulwarks against conflict to the North, rather than as conduits of it. No such discussion would be possible, in turn, without a more sophisticated analysis of the nature of Chinese power, goals and strategic culture, than can be found in the White Paper.

Developing such a comprehensive policy would go beyond the narrow remit of defence policy, but White Papers are, after all, documents of the government, attributed to and endorsed by Cabinet. As long as US strategic primacy in the Western Pacific was uncontested, Australia could conduct 'self-reliant' defence policy and defence planning largely separate in concept and execution from its wider foreign policy (with the notable exception of the relationship with the United States). But when US strategic primacy is actively contested, as it was before the late 1960s and the White Paper now again foreshadows, the strategic posture of South East Asian countries, and Australia's overall relations with them, must return to the fore.

The failing of *Force 2030* to address this wider issue demonstrates the weaknesses of Defence White Papers that are largely drafted by the Department of Defence alone. It may now be time to return to a more truly inter-departmental effort along the lines of the Defence Committee of old, perhaps based on the Secretaries' Committee on National Security. The policy-making capacity of today's resource-starved Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is not that of the former Department of External Affairs, but the next government could do worse than produce a Foreign Affairs White Paper in conjunction with the next Defence one, similar to the way that Defence's *Australia's Strategic Policy* of 1997 complemented DFAT's 1996 White Paper *In the National Interest*.

Overall, it is encouraging to see that the 2009 White Paper is committed to reform and efficiency in Defence. But the largest waste by far lies in the retention and acquisition of capability that is misaligned with strategic circumstances—no matter how efficiently it is procured and operated. Reform in this area requires a clear and coherent strategy, and thorough top-down guidance. Despite its effusive use of the term 'strategic', this is where the 2009 White Paper falls short. Developing a strategy for 'Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century' is a task left unfinished, and will have to be taken up again by new ministers and their strategic guidance.

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