
Force Expansion and Warning Time

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The twin notions of force expansion and warning time have been integral to Australia's defence planning since the 1970s. Yet over the years the focus on these issues has been neither strong nor consistent—perhaps for good reason, given that the prospect of the need for major force expansion has been seen as remote. But with the new *Age of Asia*, Australia's strategic environment is changing. This article reviews the treatment of force expansion and warning time in Australia's five Defence White Papers, and discusses the extent to which the rise of China should be a catalyst for a review of force expansion policies. Finding a position between complacency and alarm, it concludes that Defence should conduct at least a preliminary view of how Australia should identify and respond to a more threatening posture by any potential major power adversary, and to present the conclusions in the 2013 Defence White Paper.

Since its initial expression in the 1970s, the foundations of Australia's defence policy have included the twin notions of force expansion and warning time. These have been integral to the conceptual framework that has guided Australian defence planning. From the time they were first articulated, these ideas have reflected the special features of Australia's unique geo-strategic circumstances.

Two particular considerations drove the initial—and subsequent—enunciation of the ideas. The first was the conclusion that the prospect of major assault on Australia was remote; and even if such a threat were to develop, it would take many years to do so (fifteen years or more). Australia as a consequence would be able to use this significant warning time to expand the defence force and more generally to prepare for adverse times. These conclusions derived in large part from Australia's remoteness from the principal locus of international tensions—especially the Cold War and the North Atlantic—and the evident lack of capability, motivation and intent on the part of countries in Australia's region to attempt such a major assault.

The second consideration derived from Australia's geography as an *island* continent, in effect at a distance from other countries of significant military potential even within Australia's closer region. In brief, government policy gave clear priority to the direct defence of Australia and the defence of the sea-air gap, especially to Australia's north. This meant a focus on high-capability maritime forces, both naval and air. While there was also a role for land forces, this was in many ways subordinate—although the consequences for the Army were in practice contested and required several years to be resolved.

Yet for all the centrality of the concept, the focus on force expansion over the years has been neither strong nor consistent. It has become more neglected as an issue than actively pursued.

Perhaps some of the neglect in earlier years was understandable and a direct consequence of the framework in which it was conceived. That is, the likelihood of the need to contemplate force expansion was so remote that to have put much effort into analysis and planning would have been a distraction and a waste of effort. Any detailed plans would have been at risk of becoming quickly out of date. And in more recent years, there has been a greater need from time to time to plan for increasing the capacity of the force-in-being to handle shorter-term contingencies, that is to focus on preparedness, than to worry about force expansion for the longer term.

But Australia's strategic environment is changing, not least with high rates of economic growth in China and India, and other Asian countries. We face the new *Age of Asia*. It is appropriate therefore to review the policies that have hitherto been built around the ideas of force expansion and warning time and to ask whether these concepts need to be re-examined.

1976 White Paper

Australia's first Defence White Paper¹ set out the conceptual foundations for much of what followed in the Australian thinking on defence policy, including force expansion, and many of its ideas have endured to this day.

With respect to warning time for major contingencies, the 1976 White Paper concluded that

Major threats (requiring both military capability and political motivation) [were] unlikely to develop without preceding and perceptible indicators. The final emergence of a major military threat to Australia would be a late stage in a series of developments.²

It was this confident expectation of an extended period of warning which led to the associated conclusion that the defence force would be able to be expanded in time to meet to deteriorating circumstances.

Expansion, of course, would not be from a zero base. A force-in-being would evolve which would both meet shorter-term needs and be the base from which expansion would occur. It would be "adequate for timely expansion against a range of contingencies ... as indicated by the strategic guidance from time to time".³ Two other principles developed in parallel with these ideas: increased self-reliance, and a focus on those potential

¹ Department of Defence, *Australian Defence* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, November 1976).

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

operations which would be in “areas closer to home ... our adjacent maritime areas; the South West Pacific countries and territories; Papua New Guinea; Indonesia; and the South East Asian region”.⁴

But the 1976 White Paper also recognised, at least in principle, the *challenges* of warning time and expansion. It referred to

the requirement for maximum warning time ... for the expansion of the Defence Force. Constant and close watch must be maintained on whether this warning time is likely to fall short of the lead times—sometimes many years—necessary for expansion...⁵

Further, “defence preparations could not be delayed until a definite threat finally emerged. Particularly in the case of more substantial situations, we should need to act well in advance”. And good intelligence would be vital: “there must be continuous review of assessments by an expert intelligence organisation to ensure prompt detection of any significant change in the developing strategic situation”.⁶

There was also a specific note of caution that

Preparatory planning and practical measures taken in advance ... assume that the Government and Parliament of the day would be willing to respond to changes from time to time in the indicators for defence development.⁷

The 1976 White Paper’s discussion of force expansion continued in the chapter on *Defence Manpower*, stating that “timely expansion ... demands that all the necessary skills be at hand or capable of timely development as the need is foreseen”.⁸ This section also introduced a level of differentiation between the three services.⁹ On the one hand,

The manpower levels and range of skills within the RAN and RAAF are primarily determined by the equipment in service or planned to enter service.

On the other hand, Army manpower

must be at a level which permits development, within the concept of a force capable of expansion ..., of the necessary range of skills, tactics, command and control and operational procedures...

⁴ Ibid., pp. 6, 10.

⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁹ Ibid., p. 31. And on perhaps a defensive note, the 1976 White Paper explained that, across the permanent Defence Force, the “proportion of officers and warrant and senior non-commissioned officers to junior ranks increases the capability for expansion, should this be necessary.” Ibid., p. 32.

At that time, planning for the Army included consideration of the implications for the expansion base were there to be a need to expand to a million-man army for the defence of Australia against major attack.¹⁰

But in spite of the evident centrality of the concept of timely force expansion, it appears not to have attracted a high level of analytical or other effort. The author is aware of (and took part in) some analytical studies in the former Central Studies Establishment of what is now the Defence Science and Technology Organisation; these attempted to draw conclusions about the time it would take to expand to the force levels required for various hypothetical scenarios. This work was more theoretical than practical and had little impact on defence planning. There was also the attempt, sustained over several years, to update the “War Book”, an attempt at a detailed guide to mobilisation planning. But this too had little obvious impact and was later abandoned. Rather than examining options for expansion, the policy focus was instead more on refining the concept of the “core force and expansion base”, so that at a time of financial stringency, ways could be found to do more with less.¹¹

1987 White Paper

The 1987 Defence White Paper continued the same broad lines of argument as the 1976 White Paper, even to the extent of quoting directly from it on the centrality of self-reliance in the defence of Australia, and on warning time.¹² It went to some lengths to elaborate upon the concept of warning time and related issues, reflecting the more complete understanding of the core issues attained in the period between it and its predecessor. It emphasised that “higher levels of threat could emerge only after a longer period of time”, and that “the government requires a constant monitoring of international circumstances ... to ensure that Australia makes the appropriate military preparations in good time”.¹³

¹⁰ Some ten years later, the Dibb Review was to question the continuing relevance of the scenarios that had formed the basis in the 1970s of much of the Army’s planning. Department of Defence, *Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities* (the “Dibb Review”) (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986), p. 78, including footnote 4.

¹¹ The author’s recollections about the absence of serious examination of force expansion are consistent with those of former members of the two central policy divisions at that time (Force Development and Analysis, and Strategic and International Policy) whom he consulted. John Moten, one of those consulted, recalled that Gordon Blakers (then Deputy Secretary) had developed the concept of the “core force and expansion base” to help provide an analytical foundation for defence planning, and therefore for arguments for defence funding, at a time when Australia faced minimal levels of threat and consequently strong pressures to reduce the defence budget. Blakers also emphasised the criticality of good intelligence to help ensure that decisions to expand would be timely.

¹² Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987), pp. 2, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 29.

Making an important differentiation, it stated that “The development of the concept of warning has been part of the process by which Australia has distinguished its unique strategic circumstances from those of its traditional friends and allies in the northern hemisphere”.¹⁴ And, as if to reassure any remaining doubters, it then explained further:

Any decision to embark upon hostilities as a deliberate act of state policy is a major one for any government to make. There would need to be some matter of sufficient weight in dispute. Tensions would need to develop to the point where one side decides to use force. Australia does not have that kind of dispute with any nation. Much would need to change, therefore, in our international position for the possibility of such conflict to arise. ...

There would also be indicators of major physical preparation. Within our region no nation has the [capabilities] that would be necessary to launch and sustain an effective assault upon Australia. ... [The] acquisition and introduction into full operational service [of the necessary capabilities] could not be concealed and the development of the operational expertise to use this technology effectively in an assault on Australia would take many years.¹⁵

The 1987 White Paper thus repeated the message of the 1976 White Paper that the broad requirement was for a defence force able to meet the needs of peacetime and contingencies that might arise in the shorter term, and “to provide a suitable basis for timely expansion to meet higher levels of threat if our strategic circumstances deteriorate over the longer term”.¹⁶

And the 1987 White Paper took further the differentiation between maritime forces and land forces mentioned briefly in the 1976 White Paper. It made it clear, in the discussion of “more substantial conflict”, that the priority was to develop “highly capable” maritime and strike forces. And while there was a need for “expansion base elements for conventional ground force conflict”, these should “not be at a high level of readiness”, and it would be “appropriate to make greater use of the Reserves” for this.¹⁷ Further, the Army Reserves would now have a role in contingencies that might arise in the shorter term, as well as providing a basis for expansion.¹⁸

Nevertheless, as in the years following the 1976 White Paper and in spite of the reiterated emphasis on warning and expansion, little was subsequently done to take these ideas further, although some analysis was initiated in the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) to add substance to the assessment that it would take a decade or more for a regional country to develop the capacity to attempt a major assault on Australia.¹⁹ Rather, much

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁹ This important work was at the instigation of Paul Dibb, Director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation in the late 1980s.

management effort went instead into finding defence efficiencies (such as the corporatisation and privatisation of defence factories and dockyards) and into arguing that the “peace dividend”, which other nations were using as a headline to justify reduced defence budgets with the end of the Cold War, should not apply in Australia’s case, as Australia’s defence policies and expenditures had not been Cold-War-driven.

1994 White Paper

The 1994 White Paper was written some years after the end of the Cold War, and so reflected both the end of the strategic certainties and tensions of that era, and “the continuing rapid economic growth and political change in Asia”.²⁰ Nevertheless, the new White Paper continued with the core concepts of its predecessors. The “three key tasks” of Australia’s Defence posture were:

- Ensuring timely warning of significant developments in our strategic environment;
- Maintaining a force able to defeat current or planned capabilities which could credibly be used against us in short-warning conflict; and
- Maintaining the adaptability to expand or redirect our defence and national effort in response to developments in regional capabilities and to more demanding forms of conflict which could emerge in the longer term.²¹

On the matter of the prospect of major conflict, the 1994 White Paper repeated much of the argument of the previous White Papers. For example,

no country is currently acquiring the range and scale of forces necessary for [major conventional attack on Australia]. Nor does any country appear to have plans to develop such forces. ... We know from our own experience that the capabilities required could not be developed from the existing low base [in the region] in much under a decade.²²

Further, it said that

we are confident that we would have sufficient warning time to adapt and expand our own forces to defend Australia against major attack ... While Australia maintains the ability to adapt and expand our forces quickly enough to meet any development by others of forces for major attack on our continent, we do not need to maintain the actual force structure for such operations now.²³

²⁰ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994), p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 24.

The 1994 White Paper took further the change in focus of the Reserves.²⁴ It emphasised that “Reserve elements no longer exist solely to assist rapid expansion” for mobilisation for war, but instead “now have specific roles in defending Australia in short warning conflict”. And the subsequent discussion in the *Reserves* chapter tended to focus much more on the issues of planning for their use in short-warning conflict than on their value as part of the expansion base for more intense conflict.

Like its predecessors, this White Paper heralded a period in which studies of expansion were absent. Instead, there was a continued management focus on efficiencies and consolidation (for example, through the market testing program of non-core functions, and the Defence Efficiency Review).

2000 White Paper

In many respects, the 2000 White Paper drew conclusions comparable to its predecessors’. For example,

A full-scale invasion of Australia, aimed at the seizure of our country and the erasure of our national polity, is the least likely military contingency Australia might face. ... It would take many years of major effort to develop [the necessary capabilities]. ... Such developments are not credible unless there were to be major changes in the region’s security environment.²⁵

And it built on its predecessor’s observation on Asia: “the Asia Pacific is set to be the most dynamic region in the world over the next few decades”.²⁶

But one difference might be noted. On the one hand, the 2000 White Paper gave examples of the development of military capabilities in the Asia Pacific region, and concluded that

Our defence planning therefore needs to take account of the likelihood that capabilities in our region will continue to show substantial and sustained growth, in ways that are important to Australia’s military situation.²⁷

On the other hand, reference to the potential need one day for significant expansion of the defence force, and therefore to have a base from which to expand, was for the most part left implicit.²⁸

This implied change in focus was made more explicit in the discussion of the Reserves, which continued the trend towards a higher priority for shorter-term contingencies:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁵ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55. There is a passing reference here to major expansion during the warning time that would be associated with major attack on Australia.

Traditionally, the Reserves have been viewed as a mobilisation base for the ADF in time of major conflict. But recent military operations have highlighted the importance of the Reserves in meeting the requirements of contemporary military operations. ... As a result, the strategic role of the Reserves has now changed from mobilisation to meet remote threats to that of supporting and sustaining the types of contemporary military operation in which the ADF may be increasingly engaged.²⁹

The text later spelt this out for the land forces, where “it is no longer a priority to provide the basis for the rapid expansion of the Army to a size required for major continental-scale operations”.³⁰

Overall, and influenced at least in part by its decisions to use the Australian Defence Force (ADF) on operations in Australia’s region, such as in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, the government’s policies were now focussing much more on the capacity of the force-in-being for shorter-term contingencies than on warning time and force expansion for major conflict.

2009 White Paper

In contrast, the 2009 White Paper emphasised the centrality of the management of strategic risk, and the importance of warning and force expansion for this. It commented that “Strategic warning is a crucial element of defence planning” but that the warning we would get might not be sufficient to build the capabilities we would need.³¹

It made a new and important differentiation between three types of strategic development. The first was where *nearby* states might “develop the capacity for sustained military operations against us”. We could be confident of getting at least a decade of warning of this, “in part because of our current level of military capability relative to our region”.³²

Second, Australia needed to pay attention to what might be called *routine modernisation* in the region. “Such changes ... are going on all the time and we need to plan accordingly in our force development process”. Examples included the “increased prevalence of high-speed anti-ship cruise missiles and advanced torpedoes”.³³

Third was the prospect of *fundamental change* in Australia’s strategic circumstances—“circumstances of a more dramatic and, in defence planning terms, sudden deterioration in our strategic outlook”. A “transformation of major power relations in the Asia-Pacific region” would be of profound consequence, especially if there were reasons to doubt the “weight and

²⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

³¹ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), p. 27.

³² Ibid., p. 28.

³³ Ibid.

reach of US strategic primacy”, and its “willingness or capacity to act as a stabilising force”. Such a deterioration was “currently unlikely”, but “would likely require a more powerful force than the one presently contemplated”.³⁴

The possible consequences of severe strategic deterioration were addressed also under the heading of *Mobilisation*.

In some circumstances ... deterioration [of our strategic environment] could be so significant that the currently available full-time and part-time forces would be insufficient to meet Australia's defence needs, even if we surged latent capabilities within Defence. In such circumstances, we might need to draw on significantly greater contributions from the national economy and society.

Under circumstances of “national peril”, the government would pursue mobilisation, but “only a very substantial deterioration of our strategic environment that placed Australia under grave threat would justify such a course”.³⁵ The focus in the text at this point was on transport and health support, for example, rather than on, say, more fighter squadrons. Major force expansion was thus more implied than explicit, but it is reasonable to presume that this omission was merely drafter's licence.

The discussion of the Reserves in the 2009 White Paper focused on their use to provide a potential surge capacity. The value of the High Readiness Reserve got special mention in this respect.³⁶ There was also a revived interest—but at a lesser level—in examining

how part-time force elements might act as a ‘repository’ of some high-end, longer lead time capabilities related to the defence of Australia, as a hedge against strategic risk, and an expansion base should we require it.³⁷

In many important respects, therefore, the 2009 White Paper set out an orthodox approach to the issues of warning time and the potential need for major expansion of the ADF in the event of adverse developments. While it offered reassurance that “Australia will most likely remain ... a secure country over the period to 2030”,³⁸ it also drew the conclusion that the ADF proposed in the White Paper would “represent a sound basis for building [a more powerful] force, particularly in relation to our strike, maritime, air combat and special forces capabilities”. And it reinforced its commitment to

³⁴ Ibid. Some of these concerns would have been assuaged, at least for the shorter term, when, in addressing the Australian parliament on 17 November 2011, President Obama said “as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future”.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 90, 91.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

keep under comprehensive review the “emerging challenges in our strategic outlook” and the consequences for the force structure.³⁹

Yet there was also a distinct sense of ambiguity in its discussion of Australia’s strategic outlook and its consequences. It commented that “Risks resulting from escalating strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably”,⁴⁰ and that the intended force structure (even without major expansion, one infers) would give “an acceptable margin of confidence” that hostile military operations conducted by a major power adversary could be “contested effectively by the ADF”.⁴¹

A New Need for Force Expansion?

In summary, there has been a more-or-less consistent pattern since the 1970s in the treatment of force expansion and warning time (explicit for the most part but perhaps more implied in the 2000 White Paper): these ideas have maintained their centrality within the conceptual framework used for defence planning; Australia has remained secure, and developments in strategic circumstances have not led to the need to contemplate major expansion of the defence force; and consideration of the force-in-being as the expansion base has become neglected, including with respect to the role of the reserves.⁴²

Will this benign neglect continue to be justified? There are two related factors that need to be kept in mind: the secular move of relative economic strength from the North Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, and more specifically the growth of China’s economic and military power.

With this shift, Australia is now less remote from the global locus of economic and military growth than in previous decades. But it is also true that the North Pacific, with its tensions, potential flash-points and contested maritime boundaries, remains a considerable distance from Australia. Even the South China Sea, with its competing claims for sovereignty, can hardly be said to be proximate to Australia.

There are nevertheless some potential policy dilemmas here. Australia has a strong interest in the peaceful management and resolution of these tensions, not least because of the disruption to trade and investment that threatened or actual military operations would entail—especially to Australia’s economic linkages to China. But the risk remains that military

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴² Another recurring pattern has been the continuing focus on defence efficiencies, with the current Strategic Reform Program being just the latest in a long series of such initiatives, and with a 4 percent Efficiency Dividend planned for 2012-13.

confrontation could still occur, especially if diplomatic efforts (or commitment) to finding agreed and peaceful ways forward were to prove insufficient.

Any potential Australian involvement would however represent a policy choice, and for the most part would be discretionary. As argued above, any such consideration would need to recognise that the areas concerned are at a considerable distance from Australia and that the issues are complex, not least because of trade and economic considerations. And the impact of Australia's involvement, though politically potent and perhaps militarily important in some respects, would not be decisive. Australia's Defence White Papers have usually made it quite clear that there are limits to Australia's defence capacity and influence (although this recognition is not conspicuous in the 2009 Defence White Paper), and to date, Australian governments have been consistent in concluding that the development of capability specifically for such operations is not a priority.⁴³

Because of their distance from Australia, such operations would have little direct effect on the country's security against major assault, although it could be imagined that they might well prove to be a harbinger of a more general deterioration in the relationships between nations in the region and beyond.

On the other hand, we can expect that, as China's economic strength grows, so too will its military strength and its ambition for international influence (although the internal problems that China faces mean that sustained and uninterrupted growth is not inevitable). There is a real sense, therefore, in which one of the pillars of Australia's confidence in its security against major assault will become less secure; that is, while motivation and intent might well remain absent, China's ability to conduct operations against Australia will increase, as over time its military capacity expands. It is easy to judge that such a prospect needs to be taken more seriously than the possibility during the Cold War that the former Soviet Union would have attempted major assault on Australia, although China's military capabilities are still a long way from being as formidable as those of Cold-War Russia.

The challenges of major attack would of course be formidable, and much as was argued in earlier decades: the equipment, doctrine and skills required for contested amphibious assault are specialist, expensive, and difficult and time-consuming to attain; and the distances over which power would need to be projected and resupplied would remain a major defensive asset, especially if the assaulting power did not have forward bases in a more proximate country such as Indonesia. Australia would defend itself with tenacity, and it is barely conceivable that an operation on this scale would

⁴³ There would in addition in some circumstances be the question of the readiness of elements of the ADF for combat operations against a potentially capable adversary, including in such demanding areas as electronic warfare and anti-submarine warfare.

not be part of a wider deterioration in relationships that would involve other nations, especially the United States.

Further, even if China's levels of offensive capability were to increase in relevant ways, there would still be a need to establish motivation and intent. Received wisdom tells us that these can change much more rapidly than defence capability can be developed, and this is an important point to be kept in mind in defence planning and intelligence priorities. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognise the potential for foreign policy initiatives and economic interdependencies to keep relationships in good repair and to keep nations away from the serious step of military conflict. Australia must avoid any predisposition automatically to pre-suppose aggressive intent on China's part.

Force Expansion in the 2009 Defence White Paper?

Given this line of argument and the perhaps ambiguous sense of strategic alarm in the 2009 White Paper, what did that document say about force expansion? For the most part, its plans for force structure development amounted more to modernisation than to force expansion—least of all major expansion. The exceptions included some modest hedging against future risk,⁴⁴ the development of the whole-of-government Cyber Security Operations Centre, and the acquisition of maritime-based land-attack cruise missiles for future platforms. Most significant, however, was the ambitious decision to double the number of submarines to twelve.

Thus the government's current plans in many ways perpetuate the same kind of force structure that existed or was planned at the time of the 1976 White Paper, some thirty-six years ago. There has of course been some important increase in capability over this period. Examples include the development of new bases in Australia's west and north, the acquisition of airborne early warning and control aircraft, the development of the Jindalee Operational Radar Network, the acquisition of armed battlefield helicopters, an increase in the number of infantry battalions, and several other examples, such as the large amphibious ships now under construction.⁴⁵

But overall, the focus over this period, and now planned until 2030, has been more on modernisation or enhancement, with such force expansion that has occurred being incremental rather than on a grand scale. This *implies* a continued level of confidence that timescales for significant strategic

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 85. This hedging is in the areas of space warfare, ballistic missile defence, and some aspects of defence against weapons of mass destruction.

⁴⁵ There have also been some force reductions, such as the non-replacement of the former aircraft carrier *HMAS Melbourne* (and before that the carrier *HMAS Sydney*), fewer Abrams tanks than Leopards, a smaller full-time defence force (achieved through various efficiency measures and out-sourcing initiatives), and fewer F/A-18 fighter aircraft than Mirages (the figure up to 100 new combat aircraft, as set out in the 2000 White Paper (p. 87), was based on the approximate sum of the numbers of F-111C and F/A-18 aircraft then in RAAF service).

deterioration continue to be longer than those that would be needed for major expansion to meet the more demanding circumstances—and that, in effect, *a period of strategic warning has not yet commenced*. It also encourages the perhaps surprising conclusion that the force structure judged appropriate for Australia at the height of the Cold War is similarly being judged appropriate, when modernised and expanded at the margins, for this new *Age of Asia*.

The outstanding exception is the decision to double the number of submarines. The White Paper does not reveal the argument that has led to this conclusion, citing reasons of national security, other than to say that it is based on analysis of defence planning contingencies.⁴⁶ Similarly, there is little public information on the timescales that will apply to the new submarines, perhaps because the way ahead for this project is unclear. An optimistic estimate would be that the first six new boats will have replaced the six *Collins Class* by 2030, with the force building up to twelve new boats by the mid-2030s, but it is also credible that the force will not reach twelve boats until the early 2040s (some thirty years from now). This illustrates well the extended time needed to expand this capability, at least under conditions of peacetime decision-making and procurement.⁴⁷

It is possible that the argument for the expansion is based on contingencies that would be credible in the shorter term. But this would be far from convincing. The expansion timescales are too long to make sense as a response to concerns about the shorter term. And the primary roles of submarines—the sinking of an enemy's vessels—are too unambiguously aggressive for more nuanced or limited types of operation.

This expansion would make better sense, however, if it were a hedge against significant strategic deterioration over the longer term, or a belief that by the period 2030-40 the potential warning time for such deterioration will be much shorter than it has been until now.⁴⁸

It implies—but does not address—the conclusion that other force elements would *not* need to be expanded, or that their timely expansion would be far easier than for the submarines. There is, however, no suggestion of this line

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁷ For a more extended discussion of the range of timescales that might apply to the timing of the Future Submarines, see Andrew Davies and Mark Thomson, *Mind the Gap: getting serious about submarines* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2012).

⁴⁸ The author is grateful to Andrew Davies for pointing out the contents of the State Department cable (State 030049 of 28 March 2009, classified Confidential, made public by *Wikileaks*) which reported the meeting between Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and the-then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. This cable states that Rudd described himself as “a brutal realist on China”, and said that the 2009 Defence White Paper’s “focus on naval capability is a response to China’s growing ability to project force”. In some respects, this is a useful confirmation, but it does not advance the argument very far.

of argument in the 2009 White Paper—or even from Canberra’s more informal “company town” sources of communication. (And the argument that there would be no need to expand other force elements would in any case not be credible.) This omission does little to encourage confidence that the consequences of strategic deterioration have been thought through, or why it is appropriate to move now to expand the submarine force but not other elements of the force structure.

Policy Conclusions

Where, then, should the balance be struck between strategic complacency and alarm? The issue is not clear cut. On the one hand, it would seem too early to start worrying about taking steps towards major force expansion as, at this stage, a major adversary’s capability, motivation and intent are all absent, and could well remain so for the foreseeable future. And it would be a mistake automatically to ascribe aggressive intent to rising powers, even those with political systems different from ours.

On the other hand, the concept of warning and force expansion remains an integral (if neglected) part of the conceptual foundations of Australian defence planning, and the economic strength and military capacity of many Asian nations continue to grow.

The balance of the argument seems to favour the development of at least a preliminary view of how Australia would identify and respond to a more threatening posture by China—or by any other potential major power adversary. Such analysis would include views on warning time and modes of expansion, leading to judgements on the characteristics that should be retained or enhanced in the force-in-being so that it would remain effective as an expansion base. And to avoid being just an exercise in alarmism, this work should also include consideration of the factors and indicators that would argue against a need for major force expansion.

The role for the Reserves would merit specific consideration. It would be difficult to argue that the Reserves should not have a role in the expansion base for higher levels of contingency. The extent to which this should be done would depend at least in part on conclusions about warning time and strategic deterioration. In the probably unlikely event that warning time were assessed as being even longer than hitherto, more capabilities could be entrusted to the Reserves. Were warning time assessed as being shorter but not too short, there would be an argument for increasing the level of resources allocated to the Reserves and generally taking them more seriously. If the assessment were that Australia had now entered a period of serious strategic deterioration (on balance not a likely conclusion), the Reserves and permanent forces alike would need to be expanded and moved to higher levels of preparedness.

There would also be a need to think about the possible consequences for industry policy. The decades since the initial articulation and analysis of the concept of force expansion have seen quite radical changes in defence technologies, and in defence industry both overseas and in Australia itself—and therefore changes in the potential supply of and support for an expanded defence capability. And over the years, the study of Australian industry as an expansion base has been conspicuously absent—if for understandable reasons, given the difficulties of developing and implementing defence industry policy even for peacetime, and the remoteness hitherto of any need to expand.⁴⁹ As argued elsewhere, defence policy for industry should be driven primarily from the perspective of strategic policy, not industry policy, and the same principle should apply to any consideration of expansion base aspects.⁵⁰

The next Defence White Paper is now announced for 2013. Governments usually take White Papers seriously, and there are many indicators of the extent to which such documents are successful—internal consistency being a principal criterion, including consistency between strategic ambition, likely costs, and likely funding levels (an achievement often honoured in the breach). Comprehensiveness is another important benchmark. The preparation of the next White Paper, therefore, will represent an important opportunity to the government and Defence to examine the force expansion and warning time issues set out in this article and to present the conclusions to the public. The time is ripe for this important set of issues to be revisited.

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⁴⁹ The 1976 White Paper refers briefly to “the progressive development of a range of basic technologies and capacities which would facilitate an intensification and diversification of present activities to match force expansion, should the need arise”, while cautioning that the establishment of “large scale production facilities appropriate to only **major** expansions ... take a lower priority”, Department of Defence, *Australian Defence*, p. 51, emphasis in the original. The 1987 White Paper reiterates the low priority to be given to “production facilities appropriate only for a major expansion”, and adds words of explanation, for example the speculative nature of the requirement, high cost, and lack of peacetime workload. Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, p. 77. There is no obvious mention of the subject in any of the subsequent White Papers.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Richard Brabin-Smith, ‘Defence and the Need for Independent Policy Advice’, *Security Challenges*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 2010), pp. 9-17.