



MEETING AUSTRALIA'S 21ST CENTURY STRATEGIC CHALLENGES: SYNTHESISING FORWARD AND CONTINENTAL DEFENCE POLICIES

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SYNOPSIS

Australian governments can no longer define their approach to defence policy with either a forward or continental defence strategy, due to the increasing interdependence of the modern global security environment. Australia must balance both defence ideologies and define the role of defence policy as part of a broader security strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Australia should pursue middle power diplomacy in Asia to prevent Chinese fears that the ANZUS alliance is a form of containment strategy – a strategy employed to stop the expansion of an adversary. Australia must also increase defence expenditure in order to engage more credibly in regional peacekeeping efforts. This policy will reinvigorate the ANZUS alliance and provide a platform to integrate with South East Asian states. If Australia reorganises its force structure – the allocation of the Defence budget to combat-capable parts of the military – to create a more integrated force across all domains, it will be more effective in mitigating prevailing transnational threats, especially terrorism.

REFRESHING AUSTRALIA'S 'FORWARD DEFENCE' POLICY

Australia cannot apply the policy of forward defence to its current security situation in the same way as during the Cold War. Forward defence, in that context, was the strategic commitment to deploying military resources in our regional sphere of influence, primarily South East Asia. Policy makers of the day believed that such deployments would benefit the security of Australia by heading off potential threats before they reached the mainland of the continent. As the maxim went at the time, "it's better to fight them up there than down here." Australian policy thinking currently favours forward defence as opposed to a continental defence, or a 'geographically-based' approach, which would entail tailoring the ADF to operate primarily on Australian soil rather than on overseas deployments. This predilection for forward defence was evident in the 2009 Defence White Paper which outlined a build-up of Australian naval resources, alongside those of the US, in the maritime regions surrounding China as a means to offset the changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. The problem is that Australia's force structure, designed to meet traditional threats in the regional environment, is not adequately equipped to deal with the increasing transnational nature of threats.

The diverse and complex nature of the current global security environment requires a new mix of forward and continental defence strategies. The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic arena, and the scale of the area concerned, requires Australia to [develop security partnerships](#) across this space. The pervasive threat of terrorism in the post-9/11 era has served as a reminder of the global nature of Australia's interests and the fact that the threat of terrorism must often be [fought at a great distance](#) from home soil. In this sense, the rudimentary foundations of 'forward defence' retain some strategic credit, but Australia must adapt those foundations to the realities of contemporary defence. One effort that would contribute significantly to the vital policy area of counter-terrorism would be to improve Australia's security links with Indonesia. Such efforts have already begun, with Australia's funding and training of Densus 88, Indonesia's elite anti-terrorism unit. However, the 2016 Defence White Paper [could have gone further](#) in providing a credible strategic blueprint to achieve more comprehensive defence cooperation with Indonesia, and there was a tangible regression from the plans outlined in the [2013 White Paper](#) to leverage the mutually beneficial force postures – the doctrine that dictates how a military will be utilised to meet national objectives – of both countries.

PURSUIING MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Australia can no longer afford to allow its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific to be seen as defined solely by the ANZUS alliance; this approach can sometimes appear to China as a [strategy of containment](#). Australian policymakers thus face challenges in managing the US pivot to the Indo-

Pacific, assuming of course that this pivot isn't reversed under the Trump presidency. Whilst reinvigorating the ANZUS alliance is critical for Australia, Australia must also prove to China that a strong ANZUS alliance is [no barrier to strategic integration in Asia](#).

In order to avoid Chinese misconception of the reinvigoration of the alliance, Australia can concurrently emphasise and further pursue [middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific](#). Middle power diplomacy would entail Australia establishing [initiatives](#) like security dialogues, military capacity building arrangements and intelligence-sharing agreements with other middle powers in the region. By tailoring its strategic policy to the specific characteristics and strategic aims of South East Asian states Australia will gain the ability to complicate Chinese encroachment without direct provocation of China. Pursuing the goal of creating diversified middle power coalitions would tactfully counterbalance China's strategy, which is to seek to order the Indo-Pacific into a hierarchy of [bilateral relationships weighted in China's favour, so as to provoke weaker powers into competition among themselves](#). The imperative is for Australian policymakers to strike the right balance between [inclusionary and exclusionary strategic relationships](#) with respect to China.

FOCUSING ON PEACEKEEPING

Increasing peacekeeping efforts in the region would ensure sustainable regional stability, as it would entail strategically integrating rising South East Asian states. Two primary roles of the Australian Defence Force are maintaining Australian credibility as a peacekeeping actor and developing strong relationships with South East Asia. This approach does represent an integration, of sorts, of the forward and continental defence policies. On the one hand, it emphasises the outward-looking force posture central to traditional forward defence, which is crucial for the current environment. However, it would also ameliorate the weaknesses most often ascribed to traditional forward defence policy – namely, that it was a strategy built on alliance pandering and over-reliance on ANZUS – which generated the momentum to look inward and pivot to continental defence. Accordingly, the importance of initiatives like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), which the [2016 White Paper](#) outlines as a key body for regional cooperation on such matters, cannot be underemphasised. Strategically integrating South East Asian states as they rise, rather than waiting until their ascension has been fully realised, will enhance [their future readiness to contribute](#) to the protection of regional order and norms.

Australia must [maintain credibility](#) in the field of peacekeeping by increasing and maintaining defence expenditure – which, as a percentage of GDP, in recent years has been around its [lowest level](#) since 1938. The increased focus on peacekeeping will better enable the ADF to meet contemporary

challenges and ensure the continuity of the US-led coalition. Australia would also [avoid being perceived](#) by the US as a 'free-rider'.

REORGANIZING AUSTRALIAN FORCE STRUCTURE

Australia's current force structure has not adjusted to the decline of conventional military threats and the rise of transnational threats that followed the end of the Cold War. If we take the 2016 Defence White Paper as an example, we find that its focus on the importance of maritime strategy and capability in South East Asia and the Pacific correctly addresses the conventional defence imperatives. However, this focus on conventional military threats represents an imbalance. Future policy iterations should afford more attention to the need for the force structure to develop a [thin but broad set of capabilities](#) in order to deal with the sporadic and diverse nature of challenges in the post-Cold War environment. At the current rate, by the time the infrastructure capability improvements for the RAN, RAAF and Army are fully operational, they may have been [outpaced](#) by the rapidly changing strategic environment. To avoid such eventualities the force structure should develop an increasingly diversified character. The rising threat of terrorism also [requires Australia to focus on domestic measures](#) centred on increased security and a heightened cooperation between military, police and intelligence bodies. Australia should respond to the complex modern security environment of both state-centric and non-state hybrid threats by adapting to a more [flexible and creative security structure](#) – one that is able to operate in a global and regional capacity. Due to the [lack of a need](#) for forward military posturing and the absence of conventional military threats to the Australian mainland, expanding the traditional ADF would be an unwise use of resources.