
Discovering Australia's Defence Strategy

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On paper the strategic core of Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper exists in three matching pairs of strategic interests and objectives. These relate firstly to Australia's direct security, secondly to Australia's closer region in the South Pacific and maritime Southeast Asia, and thirdly to the wider Indo-Pacific and global security environment. Repeated injunctions that Australia should put its weight behind the global rules-based order indicate that the third of these is a major preoccupation. But how this goal connects to the ambitious force structure outlined in the White Paper is unclear. Instead, Australia's drive to position itself alongside the United States, maximise America's involvement in Australia's region and develop closer connections with American forces and military technology does more to explain how this White Paper comes together. So too does an implicit argument that the defence of Australia's maritime approaches begins further into the "Indo-Pacific" region than some may have assumed.

To find the strategic kernel of Australia's latest Defence White Paper, a working definition of strategy is required. This is no small order given the various understandings of that term in the strategic studies literature. But rather than identifying one approach at the expense of others, it is possible to combine some of the main elements from various understandings of strategy and still come out with something that is both meaningful and practicable.

A working definition of strategy for the present purposes needs to keep in mind three main aspects. First, strategy involves relationships between ends (which are often thought of as policy aims) and means (which in this context are military resources of various sorts which contribute to the capacity to use and threaten organised violence). If a Defence White Paper does not offer a clear view on the various military means that the government of the day believes are needed (including defence capabilities and the finances required to obtain them), it will not have done its job. But if a White Paper has not explained how those resources are connected to, and shaped by, the government's defence policy objectives, it will also have fallen short. Strong opinions on capabilities without a clear sense of what they mean for a country's wider purposes are clear signs of strategic myopia.

Second, this relationship between ends and means is not a question of getting policy coordinated domestically. That would confuse the formulation of a strategy designed to shape the wider environment with a process of national planning. The ends (or objectives) informing and energising Australia's strategy should relate to the influence that Australia wishes to

have on other strategic actors. These are mainly other members of the global system of states, which range from close allies to potential adversaries. But they also include non-state actors. Getting others to do what Australia would like to see them do—whether that is to cooperate in ways that offer Australia an extra sense of security, or to be persuaded not to take actions that would harm Australia’s security interest—is a crucial and defining aspect of strategy.

The first two elements of strategy identified here are also related to one another. To the extent that other purposeful actors are seeking to use their ends-means connections to influence Australia (whether these actors are allies, adversaries or something in between), strategy becomes an interdependent relationship between bargaining agents. This points to the third element. Strategy is also about choice. There are choices, of course, to be made in the decisions over the allocation of scarce resources. But there are also choices about the overall position or posture Australia wishes to adopt in pursuit of its security objectives: in other words where Australia wants to position itself in the games of influence among the other bargaining agents in its external environment.

Some such postures, including the adoption of a middle ground between a traditional ally and a rising power, might appear to involve the avoidance of choice. And some choices may be more implicit than explicit. But they can still signal to others the movement towards and around a particular position. Moreover, because of the fluidity and feedback between our ends and means and between our strategies and the strategies of others, there is no such thing as a fixed or permanent choice. Or, at least in theory, so it would seem!

These three essential characteristics of strategy produce the following generic definition: *in our strategy we choose how to connect our ends and means to encourage suitable choices from other actors*. But this is too broad for identifying and evaluating strategy in a defence policy context, and more specifically in an Australian defence policy context. A more focused approach is warranted. It might read as follows: *with its defence strategy (as articulated in the 2016 Defence White Paper) the Australian Federal government signals its choices which connect Australia’s defence policy aims (ends) to the use, threatened use and management of armed force (means) to encourage allies, partners and adversaries to make ends-means choices that suit Australia’s security interests*.

These are not small choices for Australia, given the implications that can come from commitments to use and threaten armed force and the opportunity costs associated with the expensive long-term decisions over capabilities that every White Paper needs to grapple with. In other words, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is the subject of some of the most important strategic choices any Australian government can make. Setting

down a clear and convincing basis for these decisions is the central task of the White Paper. And that means that sound strategic guidance needs to be offered.

The Apparent Strategic Guidance

Where then are we to find that strategic guidance in the 2016 document? A clear starting point in the 2016 Defence White Paper is found with the three pairs of strategic defence interests (which signal ends) and strategic defence objectives (which provide direction on what the ADF needs to be able to do to achieve them). In the first of these pairs the interest is depicted as “A secure, resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication” and the corresponding objective is to “Deter, deny and defeat attacks on or threats to Australia and its national interests, and northern approaches.”¹ This argument should not come as a surprise to anyone who has read earlier Australian Defence White Papers. Even for those who argue that regional and global security developments have outstripped the defence of Australia logic, there is still a place for this approach as a starting point for Australian thinking. It is not whether it is going to be there or not. It is what else is added to the mix, and what relative priority is attached to these other components.

That brings us to the second strategic defence interest: “A secure nearer region, encompassing maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific.” The corresponding strategic defence objective is to “Make effective military contributions to support the security of maritime South East Asia and support the governments of Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and to Pacific Island Countries to build and strengthen their security.”² In combination with the first interest and objective (discussed immediately above) the reader would not be wrong in concluding that Australia’s strategic geography (including a secure *nearer* region) is unmistakably important, and that no wise government in Canberra could afford to ignore this reality. But that view may change a little as they read on.

The importance of influencing the choices made by other strategic actors is also brought to light at this stage—in this second pairing these include the choices made by countries identified as local partners (including Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste) and in the first pairing they include the choices made by possible adversaries whose “attacks on or threats to Australia” need to be deterred, denied and defeated. Australia can only get its ends-means connections working if these are influencing the ends-means connections of others in a favourable way.

¹ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2016* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) p. 68.

² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

But there is also an important distinction here. In the case of securing Australia (“and its national interests and northern approaches”), the deterrence, denial and defeating role falls squarely on Australia’s shoulders. It is for this purpose that a good measure of self-reliant defence capabilities have long been sought. As the executive summary opening chapter asserts with respect to this first pairing: “The Government is providing Defence with the capability and resources *it needs* to be able to *independently* and decisively respond to military threats, including incursions into Australia’s air, sea and northern approaches.”³

But in the case of Australia’s nearer region (the second interest-objective pairing), Australia’s role is instead to make “effective military contributions”. This immediately reduces the proportion of Australia’s direct responsibility for security outcomes. It also signals, as it should, that at least some of these neighbours (especially in maritime Southeast Asia) have capabilities and intentions that Australia will wish to support but not capabilities that Australia is seeking to supplant. In the immediate periphery, the White Paper asserts that “Australia must play a leadership role in our immediate neighbourhood spanning Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries in support of our national interests” (para 1.16), but even here the responsibility is less total (and less independent) than it is for Australia’s own direct security.

The third strategic interest is a mix of two of the emerging themes in Australian strategic thinking. This is the quest for “A stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.” The corresponding strategic defence objective is to “Contribute military capabilities to coalition operations that support Australia’s interests in a rules-based global order.”⁴ One of these themes is the notion that Australia should see its wider region in Indo-Pacific terms, an approach which connects its (sometimes previously overlooked) western interests in the Indian Ocean with its more northern and north-eastern interests in East Asia and the Pacific. Strictly speaking, because much of maritime Southeast Asia (including the Indonesian archipelago) is the connection point for the Indian and Pacific oceans, the separation of the second and third strategic defence interests is slightly problematic here. However, writers of defence white papers can rarely afford to be purists, and this point of connection in the wider region will be returned to later in this article.

The other emerging theme in Australian strategic thinking here is the importance of a global rules-based order. While it is certainly fair to argue that this is a long-standing interest on Australia’s part, the emphasis on

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17, emphasis added. On self-reliance in Australian strategic policy, and its relationship to the mounting of independent operations, see Stephan Frühling, ‘Australian Defence Policy and the Concept of Self-Reliance’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 5 (2014), pp. 531-47.

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2016*, p. 68.

sustaining global rules reflects Canberra's understanding of the main patterns in its wider security environment. In other words, there are significant challenges, which are being posed by significant *challengers*, (both states and non-state actors) to a strong system of rules for international conduct that are in Canberra's interests to promote and protect. This may explain the slightly curious division of labour mentioned in the previous paragraph. It is almost as if the Indo-Pacific is defined functionally (that part of Australia's wider region where challenges to the rules-based order are to be most expected) as much as it is geographically. A section from the White Paper is worth quoting at some length here:

The Indo-Pacific includes North Asia, the South China Sea and the extensive sea lines of communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans that support Australian trade. A stable rules-based regional order is critical to ensuring Australia's access to an open, free and secure trading system and minimising the risk of coercion and instability that would directly affect Australia's interests. A stable rules-based global order serves to deal with threats before they become existential threats to Australia, and enables our unfettered access to trading routes, secure communications and transport to support Australia's economic development. (para 3.9)

The Same but Different?

With this third interest-objective pairing, one has to wonder about the combination of problems and responses that is being identified and proposed. It is quite plausible to argue that global rules are being challenged in both the Indo-Pacific region and further afield, and this does give a semblance of a framework with which to view a changing world and Australia's response to it. But the challengers to these rules, the specific rules they are seen to be challenging, and where and in what context they are challenging it, can lead to some quite different visions of how the world is moving. All of this has potentially significant implications for Australia's strategic interests and involvement, and the necessary capability choices that might follow.

In East Asia, for example, the main challenges to order (and the rules that sustain it) are associated with the strategic competition between strong states, and the management of the changing distribution of power between them. The difficulties in finding consensus on what constitutes good maritime behaviour in the South China Sea, for example, reverberate from differences in views and action among China, the United States, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia itself, and other states. Australia's partners in this rule adjudicating endeavour are other nation-states, and so too are its potential adversaries (if we wish to frame it in the way).

It follows that "Coalition operations that support Australia's interests in a rule-based global order" (those actions which Australia expects to contribute) are designed to change the minds of one or more other nation-states in Asia involved in the "competition between countries and major powers trying to

promote their interests outside of the established rules” (para 2.6).⁵ And the most likely target for these operations would appear to be Australia’s number one trading partner. This seems the obvious conclusion to draw from the White Paper’s criticism of China’s activities in the South China Sea, including land reclamation.⁶ There is also no doubt that China is being singled out in the repetition of a now standard position (shared by Japan and the United States) that: “Australia is opposed to any coercive or unilateral actions to change the status quo in the East China Sea.” (para 2.89)

By comparison, in the Middle East, the challenges (and the challengers) to global rules appears to be quite different, even if questions about national boundaries also come into play. That region’s problems have to do with states that are too weak to maintain their obligations to global rules, rather than states which Australia feels are acting as if they are strong enough to ignore their obligations. This shortage of Middle Eastern order has been filled and exacerbated by radical non-state actors and networks. Now it has to be admitted that “coalition operations that support Australia’s interests in a rules-based global order” in this case will also be composed of other nation-states. The most likely leader is Australia’s main ally. “Australia’s shared interest with the United States in a stable rules-based global order”, the White Paper argues, “has seen us operate side by side in every major conflict since the First World War.” (para 5.29) But these coalitions will have quite different memberships to the envisaged groupings in maritime Asia. And they will often call for different capabilities. While building up the security capabilities of local nation-states can be one of their priorities (as seen in Australia’s training assistance in Iraq) these coalitions will often be aiming to affect the behaviour, and perhaps to defeat the strategies, of non-state armed groups.

As the main non-state actor of contemporary concern, Islamic State⁷ appears to have very little interest in many (or any) of the rules of the global states system. That is unless the attempt to create a caliphate is treated as de facto state building. Islamic State remains a common adversary of most if not all nation-states. It is a challenge to the system of sovereign states, and is thus a recipe for a properly international coalition. In Asia, China (along with North Korea) may well be challenging the interpretation of some existing rules. But it has a vested interest in the perpetuation of the system of states. And what Canberra depicts as Beijing’s challenge to rules will not lead to a more or less unified international coalition ranged against it, but to a much smaller regional coalition (with some states in Australia’s region notably absent should any military action be contemplated).

⁵ The non-state exception here might be piracy as a challenge to global rules in maritime East Asia.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷ Instead of this widespread formulation, the White Paper refers to Daesh.

Ask people whether Islamic State (and other non-state groups who resort to terroristic violence) should be part of the evolving global system of rules and they will presumably say not at all. But ask people whether China should be part of that system, and presumably many (but not all) will say yes. This does not make it easy to make this happen. But the difficulty of a task does not render it any less important. There is certainly some acknowledgement of China's potential as a partner for Australia in the White Paper: the two are said to enjoy a "productive defence relationship". (para 5.64) And the contrast between the depiction of the United States and China is especially stark, as is the sense that Australia is cementing its positioning alongside the former. Asking why that is so leads us to consider what the real strategic guidance in the White Paper happens to be.

The Real Strategic Guidance?

Lurking close to the surface of the 2016 Defence White Paper is a chain of logic which seems a surer guide to the direction in which Australian strategy is heading than the triumvirate of interests and objectives discussed above. The first component of this logic is a judgement that the challenges to the prevailing set of global rules are so significant that they require Australia to adhere itself firmly to coalition responses to keep these rules in tact. And the obvious point of adherence is the United States, which underwrites these rules on the global stage and in the wider region of which Australia is a part. One might ask which of these points precedes the next: is the argument about rules the independent variable requiring an even stronger Australian connection to the United States or does the reverse apply? But in either case the connection between these factors is very firm.

Second, while the White Paper deals with challenges from non-state actors to this global rules system further afield (notably by Islamic State in the Middle East) its main underlying concern is the extent to which rules favourable to Australia's interests and values are being challenged in Asia. Canberra's central concern is firstly that American power in Asia, in relative as well as absolute terms, is not diminished. "The levels of security and stability we seek in the Indo-Pacific", the White Paper maintains, "would not be achievable without the United States." (para 2.9) Some confidence on this score is expressed: "The United States will remain the pre-eminent global military power over the next two decades" and "the active presence of the United States will continue to underpin the stability of our region" (para 2.8) say the writers of the White Paper. But it is clear they also want other like-minded countries to help sustain a preponderance of military power that is favourable to Australia.

In all of this Canberra's interest in combating global terrorism (as a major challenge to global rules) is secondary to this (Indo-Pacific) regional picture. But Australia's contributions to coalitions further afield, including in the Middle East, allow for even closer connections with the United States, the

main provider of security in Asia. The two approaches can therefore be complementary in this sense, rather than competitive.

Third, China's rise, which constitutes the most serious challenge to American predominance directly, and to the preponderance of power that suits Australia more generally, is seen as a net loss in strategic terms for Canberra. The question of rules is clarified by this context and is not nearly as important without it. China's approach in the South China Sea certainly does challenge the traditions of open maritime access that suit Australia's interests (and America's). Some will add that one cannot find scrupulous adherence among a number of other East Asian states to the rules regarding freedom of passage. But this is not the main point. The insistence of upholding rights under these rules is more than a legal exercise designed to encourage all states parties to cherish the existing global order. It is also an exercise in power which is mainly directed at China.

Fourth, in terms of influencing the choices that other actors make, two main varieties of this strategic purpose inhabit Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper in consequence of these earlier observations. On the one hand, Australia is keen to attach itself to coalitions that might dissuade China from continuing with certain behaviour which Canberra (and its main partners) regard as destabilising. There may also be a hope that Beijing will conclude, because of the array of countries arrayed against it, that coercion will not pay, and that any increase in Beijing's ability and willingness to project military power into the region will result in much smaller payoffs than Beijing anticipates.

On the other hand, to do this requires that steps be taken to encourage the United States to remain as militarily engaged in the region as is possible, to believe that its regional deterrence mission (also a form of coercion) is effective, and that growing its own military capabilities does indeed pay off. This means, amongst other things, that Australia needs to meet Washington's expectations that it will "share the burden of international security and make meaningful contributions to international coalitions". (para 5.29) It also means finding other forms of encouragement including Canberra's enthusiasm for American force posture initiatives in northern Australia which the White Paper says "will expand our cooperation, increase opportunities for combined training and exercises and deepen the interoperability of our armed forces." (para 5.26)

Fifth is the central strategic choice for Australia which should be of little surprise to readers of the White Papers of 2009 and 2013. The 2016 version places Australia's defence relationship with the United States front and centre. There is a slightly curious clause which acknowledges that "the interests of Australia and the United States will not always align", but that same sentence concludes with the judgment that "the capabilities outlined in this White Paper will allow us to continue contributing meaningfully to United

States-led operations in response to regional and global security challenges wherever our interests are engaged.” (para 5.30)

This has important implications for the ADF's force structure and the future money that will be spent on upgrades and new builds. The White Paper signals that Australia “will emphasise capabilities that allow us to operate more seamlessly with United States forces in maritime sub-surface and surface and air environments, as well as across the electro-magnetic spectrum.” (para 5.22) The strong emphasis on maritime capability modernisation reflects this logic, as indicated by the section on the most expensive item on Australia's defence shopping list. As is noted in the chapter on the future ADF, “regionally superior submarines with a high degree of interoperability with the United States are required to provide Australia with an effective deterrent”. (para 4.25)

No other factor than Australia's drive to position itself alongside the United States and to maximise America's involvement in Australia's region and exploit connections with American forces and military technology, offers a better explanation for the way that this White Paper fits together. “A strong and deep alliance”, we read in the Executive Summary, “is at the core of Australia's security and defence planning.”⁸ The section on Australia's international defence relationships confirms that “The Government's highest priority will continue to be our alliance with the United States.” (para 5.17) But the reader could be forgiven for concluding that this statement can stand on its own as a depiction of Australia's defence strategy.

Missed Opportunities and Opportunity Costs

This approach brings the advantages of clarity and simplicity. But there are also some costs to consider. In the first instance the whole edifice banks on continuing US pre-eminence. American preponderance comes first, a wider coalition involving like-minded regional countries second, and both are designed to forestall China's impact. Nothing so consequential as American military withdrawal from Asia or a collapse of its alliances, or the establishment of Chinese hegemony is required to test this proposition. All that is required is for China to be strong enough to challenge America's dominance and its ability to encourage others to favour the rules and traditions which help sustain its preponderance of power in Asia.

Arguably we are already at that point. It might be suggested that this is precisely why the rules of the global order, as they apply in Asia's strategic relationships, need protecting. But in the approach adopted in the White Paper, is Australia forgoing opportunities to regard China as a more meaningful regional partner, including in the evolution of global rules (which cannot and will not stand still)? China comes across as a strong power that

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

is shaping Asia's security, but as a promoter of the wrong rules and the wrong order. The White Paper identifies a number of regional partners as supporters of the global rules-based order. In addition to the United States, these include a number of Asian powers such as India, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea. The depth of Australia's partnerships with Indonesia (whose increased maritime focus is welcomed—para 5.34) and Singapore ("Australia's most advanced defence partner in South East Asia"—para 5.50) are also highlighted. Partly by virtue of its involvement with Australia in training Iraqi forces, New Zealand is presented as a strong fellow supporter of the global rules-based order and, after the United States, the other ANZUS ally. Japan almost becomes a replica of Australia: "We each have alliances with the United States and we have common strategic interests in secure and free-flowing trade routes, a stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order." (para 5.59)

This last example makes the absence of China as a rules supporter stand out even more: Japan and China are after all among the strongest of adversaries in the wider Indo-Pacific region depicted by the White Paper. Of course, one would not expect China to be presented as one of Australia's dearest and longest-standing military partners. And one would not expect an Australian government in 2016 to share Hedley Bull's logic from the early 1970s that a strong China could be part of a multipolar regional equilibrium, and thus a balance against American power.⁹ There is scant sign in the White Paper of enthusiasm for Hugh White's call for the grand accommodation of a rising China.¹⁰ But it is not clear that the military means emphasised in the 2016 Defence White Paper are the best supporter of the global system of rules that China is expected to inhabit, nor that they will be effective in influencing Beijing in the direction that Canberra implies is necessary for order. Strong military enforcement of the rules by way of coalitions of the willing led by the United States could instead be a recipe for a costly confrontation. This White Paper suggests that Australia is set to rely too much on what Thomas Schelling calls the diplomacy of violence,¹¹ and not nearly enough on simple diplomacy.

Finding Australia's Strategic Focus

As well as a danger here, there may also be a disconnection. A general commitment to working with the United States to protect global rules, and especially doing so in Asia, might be enough to justify a force structure twice as large and as expensive as the one outlined in the 2016 White Paper. Or it might also justify a significantly smaller commitment. Part of the strategy equation is found here: the strategic actors (including the United States and

⁹ See Hedley Bull, 'The New Balance of Power in Asia and the Pacific', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 4 (July 1971), pp. 669-81.

¹⁰ See Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012).

¹¹ See Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

China) whose behaviour and expectations Australia wants its ends-means connections to influence. But the specifics of the ends-means relationship that Australia requires for this effort remain harder to identify.

In this instance one might be tempted to fall back on the White Paper's claim that the three Strategic Defence Objectives that flow from the three Strategic Defence Interests are "equally-weighted" including in their implications for "the future force" (para 3.10). But this suggests a neat division of labour that simply does not exist. If there is a locus of effort it is not found by devoting one third of the effort (and funding) to keeping Australia, its approaches and interests secure, one third to helping maintain security in maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and one third to Indo-Pacific and global security (whatever that odd combination may actually mean¹²). These three components flow too easily into each other as to be kept perfectly separate. First, while there is a strong commitment to what used to be called the defence of Australia, the locus of that effort is in Australia's northern maritime approaches. Second, these approaches appear to be extending fairly significantly into maritime Southeast Asia. And, third, these Southeast Asian portions of Australia's maritime approaches are areas where the Indian and Pacific oceans intersect.¹³

In other words, this very Australian conception of the Indo-Pacific region is the sweet spot for Australia's defence strategy today. Growing concern about the strength of global rules in the South China Sea can become something like manna from heaven for justifying the maritime strategy that Australia is favouring and the advanced maritime capabilities upon which it is devoting so much of the capital portion of the budget. Encouraging a strong American commitment to these rules of the game in maritime Southeast Asia, including through a build-up in the US military presence in the northern parts of the Australian continent, also fits in well here. And encouraging other partners, including Japan, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and others, to support the existing rules, also take on extra meaning in this context. And so, perhaps, do the limits that are set on Australia's defence relationship with China.

Identifying this focus helps explain why Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper is big, bold, ambitious, and committed. Some serious questions remain. One is the challenge that the writers of this White Paper have set for their successors in suggesting that capital costs within ten years can rise from 29 to 39 per cent of the total defence budget, swapping places with personnel costs which fall from 37 to 26 per cent (para 8.14). That is one, but by no means, the only, reason for asking whether much room is being

¹² On the distinctions made in an earlier White Paper, see Hugh White, 'A Wobbly Bridge: Strategic Interests and Objectives in Force 2030', *Security Challenges*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2009), pp. 21-29.

¹³ The author is grateful for a comment from Andrew Carr that helped clarify this point.

left for Plan B. The choice the 2016 White Paper makes may not only prove to be expensive for Australia in budgetary terms, but on foreign policy grounds as well.

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