

From Whiteboard to White Paper: Student Perspectives on the 2016 Australian Defence White Paper

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The importance of community insights and proposals for shaping the Australian Defence White Paper has changed markedly since its inception in 1976 as a public document for Australian defence policy. These changes began in earnest in 2000 with the Community Consultation Program, prior to which the formulation of ideas for the Defence White Paper fell almost exclusively under the remit of government policymakers and defence practitioners. However, the advent of the Defence White Paper community consultation program in 2000 marked an opportunity for external stakeholders to provide suggestions as to how Australia might best manage and use its defence capabilities.¹ Capitalising upon this opportunity, undergraduate students from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at the Australian National University (ANU) have enthusiastically voiced their recommendations for future Australian defence policy.

In late October 2014, as part of a small focus group of students from the Asia-Pacific Security program² at the SDSC, we completed a comprehensive submission for the approaching Defence White Paper. Our submission encompassed four topics ranging from Australian Defence Force (ADF) reform to Australia's relationship with Indonesia. Just as importantly it served as an opportunity for us to provide our insights as the next generation of strategic thinkers on Australian defence policy.

The eventual release of the White Paper in February 2016 demonstrated the fruitfulness of our endeavour; the White Paper's section addressing the need for a dedicated defence search and rescue capability reiterated almost verbatim our proposal. In particular, paragraph 4.94 of the White Paper states, "the Government will acquire enhanced aero-medical evacuation and search and rescue capabilities",³ reflecting our observation that "there is no specialised aerial paramedical rescue capability within the ADF" and that

¹ Department of Defence, *Defence Review 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), p. 1.

² This program was replaced by the Bachelor of International Security program in February 2015.

³ Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), p. 107, para 4.94.

“the ADF should consider developing a Paramedical Rescue Operations Unit”.⁴ Additionally, our submission was quoted twice in the Defence White Paper Expert Panel’s 2015 report, *Guarding against Uncertainty*, prior to the publication of the actual White Paper.⁵ Recognising these outcomes, this brief article addresses the importance of acknowledging the perspectives and opinions of the nation’s future strategic thinkers in shaping its defence outlook.

A Different Point of View

The first benefit of the public and especially students participating in the White Paper public consultation process is that we are not bound by the constraints of agency or organisational directives. While the opinions of defence sector employees may be influenced by the objectives of their given department, students encounter no such obstacle. Thorough debate and contrasting opinions are actively encouraged within the university environment, particularly in the area of strategic studies, where it is widely recognised that decision-making should be a consultative process. This dynamic played a key role in the formulation of our submission in 2014, where dozens of ideas were condensed by process of debate and elimination into a concise four-point proposal that earned the unanimous support of the group.

In addition, students are not constrained by detailed knowledge of defence capabilities. Despite seeming counter-intuitive, this enables students to provide recommendations based on what we believe *should* be done rather than pre-emptively accepting conceptual limitations on the future of Australian defence capability. Such limitations can in turn limit creativity for future strategy and capability development. In contrast, students apply our knowledge of macro-level strategic priorities and capabilities to provide a unique perspective on the future of defence policy based on objective reasoning and critique of Australia’s future security needs.

Another benefit of the emerging generation of strategic thinkers participating in the White Paper public consultation process is the opportunity for us to try to shape our own future strategic landscape. Indeed, in twenty years, we may be responsible for the outcomes of today’s strategic and capability choices and making our own decisions that will impact Australia’s national security; it is therefore vital that we offer some contribution now. Accordingly, we remain forward-looking, capitalising on the analytical and theoretical skills acquired from our strategic studies to provide fresh insights into Australia’s future security architecture.

⁴ Gabriella Andrews et al., *Defence for our Future: Proposals from the Next Generation of Strategic Thinkers*, Defence White Paper public submission no. 116 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2014), p. 3.

⁵ See: Department of Defence, *Guarding against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), pp. 5, 19.

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The fact that one of the ideas we proposed in our submission to the public consultations appeared in a section of the 2016 Defence White Paper—albeit a brief one—reflects the capacity of developing strategic thinkers to have a tangible impact upon national policy. In addition to being an achievement in its own right, the incorporation of our ideas into Australia's foremost defence policy paper illustrates the importance of collaborative and unrestricted strategic thinking both at the university level and among the wider public.

In this vein, it is hoped that our experience will encourage other strategic thinkers, regardless of age or background, to voice their own ideas and concerns relating to Australian defence policy. This is particularly important given the very real impact of Defence White Paper decisions on the security of the Australian public. Ultimately, the outcome reflects a need for Defence to maintain efforts to consult with focus groups beyond the traditional realm of advice, whose opinions are likely to reflect a broader spectrum of perspectives on Australian defence policy both today and in the future.

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