

The South Pacific in the 2016 Defence White Paper: Anxiety, Ambivalence and Ambiguity

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Australia's geography does not change; the South Pacific (Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and the Pacific Island Countries) will always lie across some of our most important air and sea lines of communication. As identified in the 1986 *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (the 'Dibb-Review'), the South Pacific will always be the "area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed".¹ Reflecting these strategic realities, since the Dibb Review successive Defence White Papers have identified that a secure South Pacific sits only behind a secure Australia in the hierarchy of Australia's strategic defence interests.

The 2016 Defence White Paper² represents an important change; it repeats oft-cited anxieties about the stability and fragility of South Pacific states, yet by specifying that all three of its key Strategic Defence Objectives are "equally-weighted" (para 3.10), it elevates other regions to the same level of strategic import. It accordingly demonstrates a degree of ambivalence about the South Pacific by implicitly downgrading the unique role that the region plays in our strategic geography. It also demonstrates ambiguity regarding the defence challenges posed by the South Pacific by grouping its analysis of the region with that of maritime South East Asia and by overlooking the geopolitical challenges Australia faces, particularly the increasing presence of other powerful actors in the region.

In terms of continuity, the White Paper echoes earlier versions by identifying that challenges to the South Pacific include "slow economic growth, social and governance challenges, population growth and climate change". It also notes that instability in the South Pacific could "lead to increasing influence by actors from outside the region with interests inimical to ours" (para 2.35). It accordingly advocates a continuation of Australia's security partnerships in the region, including through the Defence Cooperation Program and the Pacific Maritime Security Program (the successor of the Pacific Patrol Boat Program) (para 3.21). It also flags the continuing significance of Australia's

¹ Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1986), p. 4.

² Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and the need for Australia to have the capacity to evacuate its citizens from the region when required (paras 3.23 and 3.24).

However, this analysis is paired with that of maritime Southeast Asia. Maritime Southeast Asia is an increasingly contested region and Australia undoubtedly has important strategic interests in its stability, particularly in the continued freedom of navigation. But, by grouping maritime South East Asia with the South Pacific as Australia's "nearer region" (para 3.7), the White Paper elides the two regions in its analysis. This is problematic, as the two regions have very different characteristics, with the size, geography and relative economic and military power of each region's states being the most obvious points of difference. The two regions also face different threats, with those in maritime South East Asia arising primarily between states, and those in the South Pacific within them.

There is also a degree of ambiguity in the approach that the White Paper advocates with respect to the changing geopolitics of the South Pacific. It does recognise that "countries from outside the South Pacific will seek to continue to expand their influence in the region, including through enhanced security ties" (para 2.67). Yet this observation is not referred to when outlining how Australia will undertake its defence strategy in the region, including what limitations the presence of these other powers may have on Australia's ability to deploy its defence forces in response to a major security crisis or natural disaster, or how it may limit its ability to evacuate its citizens.

This observation is also not referred to during the White Paper's analysis of Australia's key relationships in the South Pacific. For example, it rightly foregrounds Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea, including the deep defence cooperation that occurs with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and Department of Defence (paras 2.63 and 5.41). But it does not acknowledge how Australia's influence has been undermined by its reliance on Papua New Guinea hosting the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre, combined with the Papua New Guinea government's growing confidence due to its increased resource revenues and international partnerships.³ It also does not consider what impact these factors will have on our attempts at cooperation. The White Paper also recognises the importance of Australia's relationship with Fiji and consequently argues that Australia "will seek to rebuild defence cooperation" with Fiji (para 5.42). Yet it does not admit the difficulties that this may pose; Fiji is likely to welcome reinvigorated defence assistance, but Australia will be providing that support in an increasingly crowded and complex environment, evidenced most recently by the relatively large donation of military equipment to Fiji by Russia. Similar ambiguity is present with respect to Timor-Leste. The White

³ Joanne Wallis, 'Papua New Guinea: New Opportunities and Declining Australian Influence?', *Security Challenges*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2014), pp. 115-35.

Paper reiterates the importance of Australia's assistance to developing the Timor-Leste Defence Force and Ministry and the emergence of maritime security as an area of defence cooperation, including through an invitation to Timor-Leste to join the Pacific Maritime Security Program (paras 5.44 and 5.45). It again does not concede the difficulties. Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste is strained by disagreements over the division of resources in the Timor Sea. Timor-Leste also has an increasingly deep defence relationship with China, from which it purchased two patrol boats in 2008.

In some respects the apparent downgrading of the South Pacific in Australia's strategic defence objectives is to be expected; the region is now relatively stable, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands has drawn down and Australia's military and policing deployments in the region are relatively small. This stability may not last; the Bougainville region of Papua New Guinea, in which Australia has a long history of intervention, is due to participate in a potentially fraught vote on its political future (including the possibility of independence from Papua New Guinea) before 2020. The French territory of New Caledonia is also due to participate in a similar vote before 2018. While Australia is likely to be more directly affected by the Bougainville vote, the White Paper does not specifically identify these challenges. Although the White Paper does recognise that Australia has ongoing anxieties about stability in the South Pacific, the ambivalence and ambiguity it exhibits in respect of the region are concerning. Australia does not appear to have recognised that, while its strategic geography has not changed, the geopolitical context in the South Pacific has.⁴ The South Pacific remains the "area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed", yet Australia's ability to exercise influence in the region is diminishing, while the presence of other powers, some of whom may have "interests inimical to ours", is growing. If Australia continues to overlook these changes it may find itself (potentially in the very short term in respect of Bougainville and New Caledonia) with very real reasons to be anxious about the South Pacific, but with less capacity to respond to them.⁵

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⁴ Joanne Wallis, 'The South Pacific: "Arc of Instability" or "Arc of Opportunity"?', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015), pp. 39-53.

⁵ Joanne Wallis and Michael Wesley, 'Unipolar Anxieties: Australia's Melanesia Policy after the Age of Intervention', *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016), pp. 26-37.