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AUSTRALIA'S FORCE 2030: PREPARING FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF WORLD WAR

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The Australian Defence White Paper and the Defence Capability Plan 2009 detail a significant increase in Australia's defence expenditure up to 2030. This Force 2030 is a formidable one and will be able to defend Australia in the event of a global conflict.

THE AUSTRALIAN Defence Capability Plan 2009, released on 1 July, details an expenditure of A\$60 billion over the years 2009-2013 and is a follow-up to the Defence White Paper released on the 2 May. Both documents detail a significant increase in the capability of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) by 2030 and represents a significant investment in the ADF.

With Force 2030, the ADF will be able to establish sea control over the full distance of Australia's strategic approaches; project force in the maritime environment up to maritime Southeast Asia; deny adversaries access to staging bases around Australia; secure offshore territories and facilities; and conduct long-range strategic strike. Australia will be very secure with Force 2030 and may even contribute to regional stability, although its primary role is the defence of Australia against a direct armed attack, as stated in the White Paper. The development of Force 2030 is consistent with its strategic interests of the security, stability, and cohesion of its immediate neighbourhood -- as well as the stability of the wider Asia-Pacific region, in particular the security of Southeast Asia.

Implications for Southeast Asia

As Australia does not envisage any direct threat to itself from a single major power, since it can always rely on the United States as an ally to provide countervailing power, the only reason for Force 2030 is that Australia sees the occurrence of a World War as more than a remote possibility beyond 2030. Only a World War would occupy the US to the extent that Australia would have to provide for its own defence. Countries in Southeast Asia have not even woken up to the possibility of a World War, but when it does, some countries will begin wondering about its implications.

For example some questions might include first, under what conditions would the ADF start denying access to staging bases in its neighbours' territory? Second, under what conditions would the Royal

Australian Navy (RAN) start sailing through the Archipelagic Sea Lanes of Indonesia unannounced? Will the navy just stick to the designated Archipelagic Sea Lanes, which it has a right to under Article 54 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)? Or will it deviate from it, especially in the east-west direction where no sea lane has been designated? Third, will the ADF abuse its extensive surveillance capability beyond the needs of defence?

Fourth, since the White Paper mentions that one of Australia's intentions is to have the ability to exert policy influence that is underpinned by military power, one must wonder whether it would choose to lend support to separatist movements within its neighbourhood. Australia may therefore need to be more forthcoming in its explanations in time to come so as to assuage its neighbours of its plans. After all, it would be irresponsible for Australia not to warn its neighbours of the possibility of an impending crisis of global proportions, in particular, if material information is available. A secure and stable Southeast Asia will contribute to the security of Australia, as mentioned in the White Paper.

Sufficiency and Affordability of Force 2030

But if Australia is preparing for the possibility of a World War beyond 2030, then Force 2030 may not go far enough. In particular, there is underinvestment in the Army even though there is material improvement in soldier-level and Battalion Battlegroup-level protection and firepower. The possibility of the northern sea-air gap being bridged by an adversary should not be discounted even though air and sea dominance around the immediate areas of Australia will mitigate some of the risk.

The next question is whether Australia can afford to spend that much on defence? Already, the Defence Capability Plan 2009 details an expenditure of A\$60 billion over the years 2009-2013 and there are still four more cycles of Capability Plans before Force 2030 will be realised. The good news is that Australia will not go bankrupt in the process. Its current defence spending is only about 2% of GDP. Even if there would be sustained spending at the 2009-2013 levels over the subsequent 17 years, it would only result in an increase in defence spending of 1.3% of GDP per year. Although a significant increase, Australia can well afford it. The A\$20 billion in savings expected to be reaped from the Strategic Reform Programme will also reduce the pain somewhat. However, given the massive outlay, it may take a longer time to balance the federal budget and the expenditure will have to be financed through debt.

Human Impulses

The future possibility of a World War, as the Australian Defence White Paper shows, cannot be discounted. As Niall Ferguson mentioned in his book, "The War of the World", ethnic confluence, economic volatility, and waning empires were the ingredients for the previous two global conflicts which may yet engulf us again. Southeast Asia is potentially vulnerable, as it stands at the boundaries of the future empires. What is definite is that we are returning to the age of empires, but whether it will just be a competition for minds and influence, or a physical enforcement of empire's boundaries remains to be seen.

The competition will undoubtedly be fierce, brutal and could even be deadly for in Niall Ferguson's words: "We shall avoid another century of conflict only if we understand the forces that caused the last one – the dark forces that conjure up ethnic conflict and imperial rivalry out of economic crisis, and in doing so negate our common humanity. They are forces that stir within us still."

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