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Australia's new Defence White Paper: Shifting the Goal Posts

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Synopsis

The new Australian Defence White Paper issued earlier this month re-focuses Australia's strategic attention on its nearer region – the so-called Indo-Pacific arc. What are the implications for Australia's regional neighbours?

Commentary

THE AUSTRALIAN Government released a new Defence White Paper in early May, less than four years after the previous White Paper in 2009. Coming just a few months before a Federal election with the polls pointing strongly to a change of government in Canberra, the Federal Opposition has already said that if elected, they will issue their own White Paper.

The Government claims a new White Paper was required because of the Australian Defence Force's operational drawdown from Afghanistan, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands; the ongoing economic strategic and military shift of influence to the Indo-Pacific; the US re-balance to the Asia-Pacific; and the persistent impact of the Global Financial Crisis.

The Indo-Pacific Arc

Critics have suggested, some say unfairly, that the document is just a political gimmick to gain support at the upcoming Federal election by showing that the government is serious about defence. However the document does include new elements that would likely have bipartisan support.

The White Paper refocusses Australia's strategic attention back to its nearer region. The lingering expeditionary considerations of the 2009 White Paper are gone. The 2013 Paper makes much of a new strategic construct - the Indo-Pacific strategic arc - connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia. It emphasises the growing strategic importance of India and Indonesia, noting that Australia's longstanding partnership with Indonesia remains Canberra's most important defence relationship in the region.

The security of Australia itself is the first key strategic interest identified in the White Paper. The security, stability and cohesion of the immediate neighbourhood, which is shared with Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and South Pacific states, is the second key interest; the third key strategic interest is the stability of the Indo-Pacific, particularly Southeast Asia and the maritime environment.

Rather than focussing on a narrow set of bilateral relationships, the paper emphasises the importance of

multilateral approaches. It says Australia's security environment will be significantly influenced by how the Indo-Pacific and its architecture evolves. Hence Australia will do what it can to help strengthen the regional security architecture so that it embraces the US, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and other regional states within a community that is able to discuss political, economic and security issues and act cooperatively to address them. Accordingly, Canberra will actively support institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus).

Australia's shifting posture towards China

Canberra's view of China is very different in the 2013 White Paper from that of the 2009 document that reflected some hawkish views about the possible threat posed by China and its military expansion. The 2013 paper acknowledges that China is an important partner for Australia in the region and that the defence relationship is a key component of the broader bilateral relationship. Accordingly Canberra "does not approach China as an adversary. Rather its policy is aimed at encouraging China's peaceful rise and ensuring that strategic competition in the region does not lead to conflict".

Prime Minister Gillard's visit to China in April 2013 was a major breakthrough in the bilateral relationship. The two sides agreed to designate this relationship as a 'strategic partnership' in recognition of its breadth and complexity. They also agreed to conduct annual dialogues at the leaders-level, as well as annual bilateral ministerial-level Foreign and Strategic Dialogues and a Strategic Economic Dialogue, to promote closer cooperation across a range of issues. These will be in addition to the longstanding Defence Strategic Dialogue held annually between the Department of Defence and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The defence relationship is articulated further in the Australia-China Defence Engagement Action Plan. The Plan includes initiatives to enhance maritime engagement, peacekeeping cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief engagement, working-level activities, academic exchanges and senior level dialogue.

Maritime dimension

The White Paper notes that the emerging Indo-Pacific system is predominantly a maritime environment with Southeast Asia at its geographic centre. That means a strategic focus on the archipelagic arc to Australia's north stretching from Indonesia through Papua New Guinea to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Arguably this arc also includes the Philippines through which vital Australian trade routes pass and which has a pressing need to improve its maritime security. While relations with Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea are all mentioned in the White Paper as strategic priorities, the Philippines is rather down-played, being put together with Thailand as a more remote but long-standing defence partner.

The 2012 *Philippines-Australia Status of Visiting Forces Agreement* is now in place, and the White Paper notes that Canberra will seek to enhance practical engagement with the Philippines, particularly in counter-terrorism and maritime security.

Where's the money?

The major weakness of the White Paper is its lack of detail on money. It has a short chapter on Defence Budget and Finances that discusses the process but has no dollars.

The Australian Government has ruled out further funding cuts in the Defence Budget after a AUD\$5.5 billion cut last year, but retains its commitment to the 'big money' items of 12 Australian-designed and built submarines, 12 Boeing EA-18 G "Growler" fighters and 72 Lockheed Martin stealth Joint Strike Fighters. Two new Australian-built supply ships and 24 new Australian-built patrol boats are also to be fast-tracked.

Simple 'back of the envelope' calculations throw real doubt on how all these acquisitions will be accommodated within realistic projections of the Defence Budget. The money may simply not be there, unless there is some sudden deterioration in Australia's strategic circumstances necessitating a marked increase in defence spending.

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