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OPINION

United Service

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Melanesia

Australia's strategically uncomfortable trade-security dichotomy – China is our major trading partner; the United States is our security guarantor; China and the United States are strategic rivals in the Asia-Pacific – is set to continue. Australia's decision last November¹ to accept the permanent stationing of United States military assets at Australian bases as part of a global re-deployment of United States forces, has aligned Australia strategically with the United States for the foreseeable future. This decision will underpin the government's 2014 Defence white paper.

So far, China's response has been dignified, mature and restrained. If offended, it has not shown it. Importantly, bilateral trade, vital to both nations, remains unaffected.

A key consequence of the decision is that the United States will continue to expect Australia to take sole responsibility for security in our neighbourhood, especially the Melanesian archipelago – referred to by some strategic analysts as the 'arc of instability'. While the 2009 Defence white paper² addressed this issue in passing, it was more focused on ensuring provision of Australian niche contributions to the ongoing wars of the 'American imperium', especially in Afghanistan. With the last of those wars scheduled to draw to a close in 2014, the next white paper will need to make our Melanesian responsibilities a strategic priority. To this end, the Institute will take Melanesia as its focus for its next International Defence and Security Dialogue to be held in May 2013.

In the lead up to the dialogue, several of our monthly lectures will examine specific aspects of Melanesia. An excellent lecture on Papua New Guinea was delivered at our October luncheon by Ms Jenny Hayward-Jones, director of the Melanesia Programme at the Lowy Institute. Her paper commences on page 11. I commend it to you.

The Australian Army's Plan Beersheba

In our last issue, Major General Craig Williams³ outlined Plan Beersheba – Army's plan for meeting the government's expectations of it ('strategic guidance'). Plan Beersheba provides for an army of three Regular multirole brigade groups and six Reserve light infantry brigade groups which together will generate the capacity to deploy on operations continuously one brigade group and, in a separate operational area, one battalion group. The plan has evolved over the last decade and its key provisions are now well proven. It should be able to deliver capability and capacity as required by current strategic guidance, without the need to invoke Reserve call-out provisions (the Reserve contribution will be drawn from individual

volunteers). The government has approved the plan⁴ and Army is now moving to its full implementation.

Plan Beersheba, however, is not without its weaknesses. Firstly, it does not provide for a strategic reserve. Last century, the Army Reserve was Australia's strategic reserve, but with the Army Reserve now fully committed to current operations, Australia no longer has a strategic reserve. If this situation is likely to persist post Afghanistan, we may need to re-constitute one.

Secondly, the Plan Beersheba Army will be very small. If Australia is to be responsible for taking the lead in Melanesia, it is doubtful that an Army with the capacity to deploy only one brigade group and one battalion group would be nearly large enough. It may be the largest Army possible within current financial guidance and the current willingness of Australians to volunteer for military service, but it may not satisfy our strategic needs and responsibilities.

Thirdly, Plan Beersheba's Reserve component, in effect, will be a paramilitary force, intended primarily for post-conflict stabilisation tasks (e.g. East Timor). While the plan provides for the Reserve light infantry brigades to be trained for warfighting, they will not be equipped with artillery or tanks, both of which would be essential if they were to be deployed on warfighting tasks. It follows that our maximum warfighting capacity will be one brigade group.

In short, Plan Beersheba will ensure that Army can provide land forces for operations consistent with current strategic and financial guidance. That guidance, however, warrants immediate review in the light of the government's decision to align Australia strategically with the United States, the projected end of the Afghanistan commitment in 2014 and the consequent re-emphasis on our responsibility for security in our neighbourhood.

David Leece5

¹Prime Minister Gillard – President Obama joint announcement of 17 November 2011

²Anon. (2009). *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 – Defence White Paper 2009* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

³Williams, C. D. (2011). The Army Reserve through the prism of the current commander of the 2nd Division. *United Service* **62** (4, December), 9 – 16.

⁴Minister for Defence media release of 12 December 2011

⁵David Leece is a vice-president of the Institute and editor of *United Service*. These are his personal views.