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**Australia's Strategic Direction**

The Australian government has answered calls in these pages and elsewhere for strong whole-of-government strategic guidance with the issue of three, nested, strategic policy documents: the Australia in the Asian century white paper (Australian Government 2012), which identifies Australia's external context and a whole-of-government strategic response to it, with Chapter 8 specifically addressing regional security; the national security strategy (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2013), which outlines the whole-of-government response to the security challenges that Australia faces; and the 2013 Defence white paper (Department of Defence 2013), which outlines Australia's defence strategy and its implementation. Taken together, these documents set a sound basis for long-term strategic planning and deserve strong bipartisan and community support.

There is, however, a fundamental gap at the heart of this strategic guidance, namely a failure to identify to what extent Australia is to be self-reliant and hence to what extent it is to be reliant on friends and allies. There is an implicit assumption that there will be considerable self-reliance, but the principles remain unstated which should underpin decisions about say the extent to which Australia should be able to feed and clothe its population without outside assistance, the extent to which it is strategically sound to allow our means of primary and secondary production to be in foreign ownership, how big the Army should be, or to what extent Australia should be capable of building and maintaining its major military equipments (*e.g.* naval ships and combat aircraft) and manufacturing its weapons systems and their ammunition.

For example, at page 13 of this issue, General Morrison in his excellent exposition of Australia's maritime strategy mentions in passing that the Australian Army "... is about the right size now". This, though, begs the question – the right size for what? Certainly, the 'Plan Beersheba' Army that General Morrison describes should be able to undertake any humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping or stabilisation operation in our neighbourhood that the government is likely to call on it to perform. But if another nation-state were to use military means in pursuit of its strategic aspirations in our neighbourhood, the best the 'Plan Beersheba' Army could deploy against it would be an infantry brigade group.

An infantry brigade group may well be able to make a valuable niche contribution to a much larger allied force seeking to maintain the global order somewhere. If, however, it were to be deployed by itself in the archipelago to our north, its small size would render it liable either to being isolated and bypassed – like

Japan's Rabaul fortress – or, if deployed as separate battalion groups, to defeat in detail – reminiscent of 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade's Gull Force (2/21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Ambon), Sparrow Force (2/40<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Timor) and Lark Force (2/22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Rabaul) in World War II.

So an unstated assumption underpinning Plan Beersheba must be that, if Australia were to be challenged militarily in our neighbourhood, then the United States would accept the responsibility to defend us, with a minor contribution from us. Such an assumption, though, seems to fly in the face of the 1969 Guam Doctrine, which remains extant, and the ANZUS Treaty under which Australia is expected to take the lead in its own neighbourhood. It also assumes that the United States would be in a position to assist us when we needed that assistance [Singapore's reliance on the Royal Navy in 1941-42 may have a lesson for us here].

Whether or not such reliance on allies is sound government policy depends on where Australia chooses to position itself along the strategic self-reliance spectrum and on the extent to which our allies are prepared and able to co-operate in that choice. Following the federal elections on 7 September 2013, the incoming government, of whatever political complexion, should address itself to this question as a matter of urgent strategic priority.

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**References**

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Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2013). *Strong and secure: a strategy for Australia's national security* (Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra).

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<sup>1</sup>David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is a vice-president of the Institute. These are his personal views.