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2nd INTERNATIONAL DEFENCE AND SECURITY DIALOGUE

Australia's immediate neighbourhood: the strategic outlook and its defence and security implications

Introduction

The Institute initiated a biennial series of international defence and security dialogues in 2011 to enhance its contribution to strategic policy and to raise strategic policy awareness in the community. The first dialogue focused on the global security outlook. The second dialogue, held at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, on 26 February 2013, focused on Australia's immediate neighbourhood.

Australia's decision in November 2011 to accept the 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 2013 Defence White Paper.

A key consequence of the decision is that the United States will continue to expect Australia to take lead responsibility within the alliance for security in our immediate neighbourhood, especially the Indonesian-Melanesian archipelago – referred to by some strategic analysts as the 'arc of instability'. With the war in Afghanistan now drawing to a close, the 2013 White Paper will need to make our neighbourhood responsibilities a strategic priority.

Australia has an enduring strategic interest in helping to build stability and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood, which it shares with Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and the South Pacific Island states. In the dialogue, our focus was primarily on the small self-governing states, particularly Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga, as these are likely to be at most risk of strategic instability. Our timeframe for strategic projections was the next 20–30 years; and we were concerned with the full range of potential defence and security threats – from high-level war-fighting, through peace-keeping and stabilisation operations, to border protection, crime-fighting, resource protection (especially in the maritime domain), disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance.

An international panel of eight eminent strategists presented their views on the strategic outlook for Australia's immediate neighbourhood and its implications for Australia's foreign, defence, security, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance policies. A panel discussion with audience participation followed. The eight papers presented at the dialogue are published herein. A transcript of the panel discussion is on the Institute's website at www.rusinsw.org.au.

It is now evident that the strategic outlook for the Asia-Pacific region has become less benign. An arms build-up is continuing and it is not a time for Australia to seek a 'peace dividend' post Afghanistan. The likelihood of overt external aggression into our neighbourhood, however, still seems remote. While the capability for it undoubtedly

exists in our region and is growing, the equally essential intent is lacking. This, however, could change relatively quickly.

Timor-Leste now has good relations with its neighbours and believes it can manage its internal security unaided. It wishes to establish a tri-lateral defence pact with Australia and Indonesia to guarantee its security.

Fiji is geo-politically central to neighbourhood security but, having been isolated diplomatically by Australia and New Zealand, it has made new friends (*e.g.* China and Indonesia) and alliances (*e.g.* Melanesian Spearhead Group). Australia and New Zealand will now have to win the right to be accepted back into the Melanesian Spearhead Group and Fiji. A circuit-breaker is needed and hopefully the 2014 Fiji elections will provide this.

There is strong support for the neighbourhood taskforce model for delivery of peace-keeping and disaster assistance within the neighbourhood and wide acceptance of Australia as the leader of, and provider of force-level support for, such task forces. There also is a strong desire for full restoration of a comprehensive (including Fiji) long-range maritime air surveillance programme over the neighbourhood's exclusive economic zone and for reinvigoration of the Pacific Patrol Boat Programme.

The 'Plan Beersheba' Australian Army would be too small to undertake meaningful war-fighting by itself should this become necessary. It could only do so as part of a much larger force. To this end, I believe the neighbourhood could develop a credible military force based on six infantry brigade groups trained, structured and equipped for fighting in the islands. It would be a strong deterrent to any incursion and potentially able to defeat one should it occur. Australia's share of this force would be three brigade groups, New Zealand and Fiji should provide one each, and Australia, Papua New Guinea and Tonga should provide a battalion each to the sixth brigade. This is not achievable at present for any nation, but if the white paper were to set this as a medium-term goal, then planning, training, exercising and equipment purchases could be directed to this outcome.

The Institute had made a submission to the 2013 Defence White Paper development process in November 2012. Following the dialogue, the Institute made a supplementary submission, which included some key issues which had emerged or were clarified during the dialogue¹. The papers presented at the dialogue follow. I commend them to you.

David Leece
Editor

¹Both submissions may be viewed on the Institute's website at www.rusinsw.org.au. A summary of the primary submission was published in *United Service* 64 (1), 9 – 11, March 2013.