



**Australia’s Defence Strategic Update 2020**

On 1 July 2020, the government released an update (Defence 2020a) of the *2016 defence white paper* (Defence 2016). The update notes that Australia’s strategic environment and confidence in the rules-based global order have deteriorated more rapidly than anticipated in 2016; and the Indo-Pacific region is in the midst of the most consequential strategic realignment since World War II.

Of particular concern is the conduct of ‘grey-zone’ activities – military and non-military forms of assertiveness and coercion to achieve strategic goals without provoking conflict. In the Indo-Pacific, these have ranged from the militarisation of the South China Sea, to active interference, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion and cyber warfare. Further, military modernisation in our region has accelerated; and, while its long-term economic and social impacts are not yet clear, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted globalised supply chains.

The government has directed Defence to implement a new strategic policy framework that signals Australia’s ability – and willingness – to project military power and deter actions against us. Defence’s strategic objectives now are to deploy military power to: **shape** Australia’s strategic environment; **deter** actions against our interests; and, when required, **respond** with credible military force.

Defence planning is to focus on our immediate region ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South-East Asia, to Papua New Guinea and the South-West Pacific. This will be aligned with broader initiatives, such as the ‘Pacific Step-up’ (Defence 2016; DFAT 2017) and strengthening of our engagement with our strategic partners and our alliance with the United States.

Consequential changes will be needed to Defence capability and force structure (Defence 2020a, b). They include re-equipping the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with new information, cyber, maritime, land, air, and space capabilities, longer-range strike weapons (potentially including hypersonic weapons), and area denial systems. These changes will be underpinned by funding certainty for Defence whose budget will grow to 73.7 billion in 2029-30 for a decade total of \$575 billion.

**Comment**

Is the 2020 defence strategic update adequate for our circumstances and are its aspirations credible?

Humanity faces two existential threats: nuclear war; and climate change (Barrie 2020). The update acknowledges threats to human security, but does little to address them, other than continuing our reliance on the United States nuclear shield and giving disaster response a higher priority. The lack of action on climate change, despite Australia’s own extreme vulnerability, also will sit poorly with our Pacific neighbours. It should be central to any future national security strategy.

Given the ongoing centrality of the ANZUS Treaty<sup>1</sup> to Australia’s defence strategy, is America still up to the task? America no longer enjoys military primacy in the Indo-Pacific and its capacity to uphold a favourable balance-of-power is increasingly uncertain (Townshend *et al.* 2019). Due to two

decades of focus on counter-insurgency warfare, America has an atrophying force that is not sufficiently ready, equipped or postured for great-power competition. America, also, is racked internally by deep, partisan and racial divisions, which are being exploited by external actors and exacerbated by a badly-handled COVID-19 pandemic. These divisions are playing into the hands of America’s competitors; and its global credibility and leadership are on the line.

Townshend *et al.* (2019), among other observers, have recommended that Australia should pursue a strategy of collective defence in the region to offset shortfalls in America’s military power. Pleasingly, the strategic update provides for strengthening our engagement with our regional partners and America. The update’s belated focus on our immediate region also is welcome and will make Defence’s task more achievable. Further, at the AUSMIN<sup>2</sup> talks on 28 July 2020, Australia emphasised that it would co-operate with the United States where our interests coincided, but not where they diverged. That, also, is a welcome, if overdue, diplomatic step, but, to be credible, it needs to be underpinned by an ADF capable of acting independently if required.

The issue here is whether the strategic update provides the ADF with the combat power to fulfil its new “shape, deter and respond” mission in our immediate region, without the support of our strategic partners, especially America. This is the crux of the credibility issue.

The projected increased intelligence gathering and strike capability are welcome in light of increasing capabilities in our region, especially of China and North Korea. But, given much shorter ‘strategic warning’ times, the failure to speed up acquisition of major equipments (e.g. Attack-class submarines) is a serious weakness.

The manpower provisions, an increase of some 800 personnel of whom only 50 go to Army, is quite inadequate. Army remains the ADF’s Achilles’ Heel, capable of sustaining only a brigade group on warfighting operations, a force of strategic value only as a minor contribution to a much larger allied force. This becomes an issue in our immediate region where the update states Australia needs “to be capable of leading military operations” (para. 2.7).

Repeated pleas to government that it provide the ADF with adequate strategic reserves so that it can be sustained in combat, have been heeded only partially. Adequate onshore strategic reserves of ammunition, fuel, weapons, repair and maintenance capabilities, and, most importantly because of the long lead times involved, trained personnel (Layton *et al.* 2020), are vital to credibility and deterrence given our geo-strategic isolation.

On the other hand, greater self-reliance is expensive and finding the money for it as we try to survive a pandemic-induced recession would involve hard choices. Yet, the Israeli

<sup>1</sup>The 1951 Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, a non-binding, collective security agreement to co-operate on military matters in the Pacific Ocean.

<sup>2</sup>30<sup>th</sup> Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (between both nations’ foreign and defence ministers).

Defence Forces model shows what a middle power can do if it is sufficiently motivated.

**David Leece**<sup>3</sup>

#### **References**

- Barrie, Chris (2020). Climate change as an important component of national security. *United Service* **71** (3), 13 – 16.
- Defence (2016). *2016 defence white paper* (Department of Defence: Canberra).
- Defence (2020a). *2020 defence strategic update* (Department of Defence: Canberra).
- Defence (2020b). *2020 force structure plan* (Department of Defence: Canberra).
- DFAT (2017). *2017 foreign policy white paper* (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Canberra).
- Layton, P., Lambert, Z., Finney, N. K., and Barrie, C. (2020). *How to mobilise Australia*. Centre of Gravity Series, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Townshend, A., and Thomas-Noon, B, with Steward, M. (2019). *Averting crisis: American strategy, military spending and collective defence in the Indo-Pacific* (United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney: Sydney).

---

<sup>3</sup>Dr David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is a member of the Institute's Special Interest Group on Strategy. These are his personal views.

<sup>4</sup>These are Colonel Hine's personal views and are not necessarily those of the Department of Defence.