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Defence white papers: an alternative view

an address¹ to the Institute on 30 September 2008 by
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Australia's Defence White Papers have a poor record. The levels of long-term investment in defence they specified as necessary have not been followed by commensurate allocations of expenditure. There has been confusion of defence policy with defence strategy; and illogical and unsuccessful attempts to predict the future in detail and then narrowly configure the defence force accordingly – with disastrous results. Previous white papers were driven by the funding thought to be available politically. Instead, there should have been robust assessments of our strategic situation and only then decisions made about what could be afforded and what would have to be risk-managed otherwise. The question must also be asked whether our strategy and force structure should be based on declaratory policy rather than classified strategic basis papers. Neil James considers that prospects are better for the White Paper due to be released in early to mid-2009. In this paper, he outlines what he considers has gone wrong in the past and what needs to be done to ensure that future White Papers make an intellectually robust and effective contribution to Australia's defence preparedness.

“A knowledge of the mechanics of war, not the principles of strategy,
is what distinguishes a good leader from a bad one.”

General Sir Archibald Wavell
1939 Lees-Knowles lectures, Cambridge

Previous Defence White Papers

White papers in the Westminster system of government are declaratory policy. In other words, they tell the world what we are prepared for them to hear about our strategies and intentions, rather than what we might actually believe based on more secret studies. Whether we should base our strategy and force structure solely on such openly available documents is always doubtful and we never really do. This means we maintain some capabilities for reasons that are and must remain secret. The problem here is that some bureaucrats, academics and commentators are prone to argue, invalidly, that if a particular defence capability is not mentioned or 'justified' in a white paper it should not be maintained.

The record of Defence white papers and strategic basis papers in Australia since World War II has been less than inspiring. The first strategic appreciation, by the Chiefs of Staff in 1946 and entitled *The Strategic Position of Australia*, made a promising start. It was followed in the 1950s and 1960s by various strategic appreciations with all the objectivity and intellectual strengths of the appreciation (of the situation) process. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s we then had various 'strategic basis' papers which were more policy-

oriented and often a less intellectually rigorous process than an appreciation of the situation. The first formal white paper, *Australian Defence*, of 60 pages, appeared in 1976 and purported to set the basis for Australia's defence preparedness in the post-Vietnam War period. It was followed in 1987 by *The Defence of Australia* (2nd white paper), 112 pages; then in 1994 by *Defending Australia* (3rd white paper), 165 pages; and in 2000 by *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (4th white paper), 122 pages, this last supposedly incorporating lessons learnt from our East Timor intervention in 1999 but not really.

There have been numerous problems with these formal white papers. They have fallen into the trap of making declaratory policy paramount rather than basing at least some of our decisions on Australia's strategic circumstances and our resultant policies, strategies and plans via processes that by necessity cannot be declaratory and must be secret. They have tended to adopt a 'situated appreciation' model, in which they have sought to justify pre-made policy based on politics, ideology or perceived funding constraints, whereas they should have derived their policies and the strategies required to execute them, from a robust assessment of Australia's strategic circumstances and needs. They have failed to re-educate Australians about the 'threat' myth (*i.e.* the delusion that defence policy should be based on countering a specific threat that we can supposedly agree on or predict accurately) rather than maintain defence capabilities that are flexible and

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versatile enough to adapt to unknown or unclear strategic challenges in the future. Instead, the white papers have made flawed attempts to predict the future in detail. They have tended to be tied to weapons, systems, platforms and major equipments already in service ('legacy systems') leading to strategic myopia. There has been clear confusion between what is policy and what is strategy and an accompanying mismatch between strategy and force structure. Indeed, each lacked a chapter explaining how strategy was really to be achieved by capability development and force structure. Finally, most were obviously dollar-driven, *i.e.* they were intended to justify the amount of defence investment thought to be available politically, rather than to assess the investment actually needed.

The first three white papers

The legacy of the first three white papers was:

- a general and largely sustained decline in defence spending over the period 1973-1999;
- broadening and deepening block obsolescence of many platforms, systems and weapons;
- a decline in the strategic mobility and sustainability of the defence force;
- a considerable reduction in the size of the defence force;
- an Army increasingly reduced to a light-scales force – little more than paramilitary field gendarmerie;
- declared strategy and even joint exercise scenarios based on perceived lower-level but more likely 'threats', but a force structure (especially in Navy and Air Force) actually maintained for larger, less likely but catastrophic threats; and
- an apparent fixation on Indonesia – and hence a problem with declaratory policy, threat myths and the obvious gaps between our declared and real strategy and the resultant force structure decisions.

The crisis in East Timor in 1999 was a strategic wake-up call and had a galvanising effect on the National Security Committee of Cabinet in particular, with wider effects politically and nationally. We almost had a war with Indonesia by accident and, had we done so, it is questionable whether the ammunition resupply, medical evacuation, logistic and reinforcement systems, *etc.*, would have coped. Many of the defence force capabilities we most needed had been abolished or gutted by decisions stemming from the 1987 and 1994 White Papers trying to predict the future and then doing it so badly.

We were lucky to not suffer major strategic embarrassment, or worse, and only muddled through for four reasons:

- Australian Defence Force (ADF) professionalism (once again) rose to the occasion and stretched to cover inadequate preparedness and holes in the force structure (but not without great risks to personnel).

- The operation was near-region one, only 350NM (600km) from a major ADF mounting base in Darwin. If it had been a crisis further away we could not have done it or done it as easily.
- The Indonesians (for various reasons) chose not to fight. One reason was the strategic and tactical deterrence the ADF offered in a prolonged fight. Another was enormous diplomatic and financial pressure from the United States.
- The rest of the world came and saved us by contributing the troops and equipment we otherwise did not have when we had to rotate our forces at the six and twelve-month marks. We simply ran out of troops, especially infantry and logistics specialists in all three Services.

There was also a major problem in the implementation of the first three white papers – that of financial shortfalls between white paper prescriptions and budget reality, *i.e.* funds actually allocated to Defence in post-white paper budgets. By 2000, the gap between the levels of funding assessed as necessary in the 1976, 1987 and 1994 Defence white papers, and the funding actually delivered by governments of both political persuasions over the same period, was at least \$106 billion in Year-2000 dollars, or around 7 to 8-years-worth of Defence budgets at that time. This led inevitably to endemic deficiencies in ADF capability:

- long-term neglect severely reduced the defence force's ability to provide government with meaningful strategic options in a crisis;
- risks to defence force personnel were increased because capabilities were reduced, absent, no longer viable, or obsolescent;
- platforms and systems were often under-gunned – including the now discredited 'fitted-for-but-not-with' delusion that plagued procurement decisions in this era;
- funding was wasted through buying cheap platforms then having to upgrade them to make them fit-for-purpose – or maintain them expensively, especially if retained beyond their planned life-cycle – rather than get a better platform in the first place and save money overall in much lower through-life costs;
- hollow units and little ability to rotate units;
- poor strategic mobility, limited tactical mobility, and inadequate firepower;
- lack of deployable and sustainable logistics, equipment maintenance and medical support; and
- keeping platforms in service for very long periods, with some in each Service now even older than the parents of their operators.

The 1991 Force Structure Review, which cut the ADF by some 30 per cent, compounded the financial shortfall problem and has caused many long-term problems, including hollowness, operational tempo inequity, retention, and limitation or loss of corporate professional knowledge.

The 2000 white paper

The 2000 Defence white paper was an improvement on its three predecessors. It took account of some, but not all, of the lessons from the 1999 intervention in East Timor. Cognitive dissonance and policy-legacy problems and perceptions meant important lessons were ignored, glossed over or misconstrued because those preparing the paper included at least some of those responsible for the near disaster in East Timor. Further, the 2000 white paper still was not based on any proper strategic intelligence estimate or strategic appreciation; and it came at a time of flux in government strategic policy and in joint and single-Service strategic-level doctrine. The latter was evidenced by:

- the ADF's capstone doctrine manual, ADFP-D, which had been completed in September 1999, was not published until April 2002;
- the then Secretary of Defence was improperly interfering in defence force doctrinal matters and was factually or conceptually wrong in most of what he sought to include;
- amphibious manoeuvre concepts in our archipelagic near region were being rethought and redeveloped following East Timor; and
- there was a 'deployability' versus 'expeditionary' debate in progress, politically, bureaucratically and, within the ADF, doctrinally.

To the chagrin of the Service chiefs, the Chiefs of Staff Committee was given no opportunity to steer the development of the white paper. The consultation processes similarly were deeply flawed, with the exception of the public consultation process, which was begun as a cynical political exercise but ended up an unexpected success; and the flawed policy and strategy development processes of the previous white papers were continued. Indeed, the paper's development process was still heavily dependent on a single bureaucratic 'author', which, coupled with the inadequate consultation, entrenched the potential for failure.

Chastened by the East Timor experience, the National Security Committee of Cabinet made some effort to drive the process for once, but there was still little co-ordination with other government white papers and thinking. It did not cater for the future with sufficient flexibility and dated swiftly in a post 9/11 world the following year.

The Current White Paper

This brings us to the current white paper, originally planned for release in late 2008, but now deferred until March-April 2009, for both workload reasons and to enable the implications of the global financial crisis to be assessed and taken into account. This time, the white paper team is better balanced than before and the Chiefs of Staff Committee is taking a big interest in its development, even if it is still not being permitted steerage of the process. Consultation also appears to be better – there is a ministerial advisory panel this time – and the public consultation process is being soundly led. Interestingly, the latter process has not been as

successful as in 2000, chiefly because various minority extremist and pacifist groups have been more successful in monopolising public meetings and skewing balanced debate.

On the negative side, though, the National Security Committee of Cabinet is inexperienced; and the timing is potentially problematic following so closely on the change of government in Australia, the United States presidential election, the 2008 Olympic Games and their restraining effect on China, and the global economic crisis. Again, the paper's development is unsupported by a proper strategic intelligence estimate or strategic appreciation, although there has been some war-gaming of options; the 'principal author' dilemma has inexcusably recurred; and politico-financial trends are moving the wrong way.

Much of the background 'noise' in the accompanying community debate is also unhelpful, such as:

- the persistence of 'silver-bullet' equipment procurement beliefs, nostrums and diversions;
- regional versus global deployment red herrings, compounded by loose and slippery definitions of what is our 'region';
- seeming paranoia about amphibious ships and air-warfare destroyers, reflecting a misunderstanding of basic strategic and operational concepts, especially strategic mobility, sea control, sea denial, amphibiousness, all-arms battle, and strategic or tactical redundancy;
- the opportunity-cost myth (i.e. the flawed concept that 'one can only spend each dollar once' when some capabilities are clearly capable of use in a multiplicity of contingencies rather than just one or two);
- the over-stating of either/or strategic choices, often on quite spurious grounds;
- the notion that the 'balanced-force' principle is somehow 'conservative' or not time-tested again and again in battle and strategy;
- in force structuring debates, the flexibility and versatility principles are either ignored or not understood;
- there is a belief that policy 'has' to be driven by the dollars thought to be available – whereas robust strategic assessments and consequent policy and strategy requirements should drive the dollars allocated, and only then, if all the dollars needed cannot be made available, the resultant risk should be managed accordingly; and
- lack of knowledge/expertise/understanding of Wavell's 'mechanics of war' (see quote at the beginning of the paper) and how strategy is actually executed by the ADF in operations.

The Strategic Context for the Current White Paper

It is important that the current white paper takes cognisance of the global strategic context over the next 20-30 years and its many inherent challenges.

In Australia over the next 20-30 years:

- our economy, standard of living and general way-of-life will still be largely dependent on maritime trade over secure sea-lines-of-communication;
- our population will remain small relative to many regional countries;
- the degree and rate of our economic advantage in comparison to regional powers will continue to reduce;
- our capability edge in weapon systems will become increasingly harder to sustain, both technologically and economically; and
- we will continue to hold major uranium reserves in an era of growing energy concerns.

Challenges ahead for the Asia-Pacific Region include:

- the absence of common security architecture (there is no regional equivalent, for example, of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) to promote strategic transparency and defuse or minimise arms races, strategic miscalculations and conflict;
- war between major powers is still thinkable in the Asia-Pacific region, however unlikely at any one time, whereas it is increasingly unthinkable in other regions;
- the rise of China will remain a risk to regional and, perhaps global, stability – at least until China democratises – and the Chinese threat to invade and conquer Taiwan involves a perpetual risk of accidental war through strategic miscalculation and/or authoritarian gameplaying;
- Japan increasingly lacks strategic confidence, and growing support in Japan to adopt nuclear weapons rather than continue to shelter under the United States nuclear umbrella, risks great instability as its neighbours will not easily tolerate a nuclear-armed Japan;
- there is the continuing problem of North Korean adventurism and its inevitable, messy and expensive collapse;
- there is some unpredictability about India and whether or not it will remain a *status quo* power (especially if the neo-fascist Hindu-chauvinist parties reassume power); and finally
- there is the risk of an American decline and/or retreat into neo-isolationism.

As to the international order:

- the United Nations is still often ineffective and invariably tardy anyway – it is likely to remain so until all powers with a veto on the Security Council are democracies and democracies are the majority in the General Assembly;
- there are growing oil supply vulnerabilities for nearly everybody;
- the endemic instability in the Middle East is likely to continue because its roots are not being addressed;
- Islamist terrorism is likely to continue and, while not an existential threat as yet, may become so if such

terrorists obtain access to weapons of mass destruction; and

- climate change, pandemics, competition for water and other natural resources, population flows, *etc.* will pose inter-national, as well as intra-national, security challenges.

Given these feasible future scenarios, how should Australia position itself internationally? In the Asia-Pacific Region I suggest that we need to:

- emphasise regional security co-operation and strive for an all-inclusive common security architecture;
- help balance great-power tensions by bridging or smoothing, where possible, disagreements between United States and China and suspicions and resentments between India and China, and by helping Japan truly face its past so it can really gain the trust of its neighbours and truly face its future;
- continue our involvement in East Timor until it is no longer 'Australia's Haiti';
- continue our assistance to South Pacific countries as no-one else will help them;
- prepare for a looming demographic, political, public health and law and order catastrophe in Papua New Guinea; and
- prepare for New Zealand's likely continuing decline, both as a capable and reliable ally regionally and in broader terms its decline economically, culturally and strategically (the latter two stemming from growing Kiwi isolationism).

At the international level, we need to continue to be a good international citizen, including supporting and participating in United Nations **and** coalition operations, energy replacement efforts, free trade, and real regional development (not just 'aid' or 'guest worker' quick fixes).

The Future Australian Defence Force

As I see it, the white paper needs to provide for a Navy which has two multi-purpose amphibious ships [landing platform, helicopter, dock (LHDs)], plus a sealift ship of yet to be determined type (or a third LHD); three to four air-warfare destroyers; nine to twelve frigates; six to eight next-generation, long-range, diesel-electric submarines; and a mine warfare capability. The navy, however, will first need to solve its endemic personnel recruitment and retention challenges in order to expand to the optimum size needed.

The Army needs to continue building up to three brigades formed from eleven 'building-block' manoeuvre units – one tank, two cavalry, two mechanised infantry, two motorised infantry, three light infantry, one commando (incorporating the parachute role); plus the Special Air Service Regiment and Incident Response Regiment, *etc.* These need to be hardened and networked to beef up flexibility and reduce potential casualties. I see no future, however, for the Army Reserve (five brigades nominally) as a manoeuvre force above company level because of irreversible decline in the size of the reserve and the huge expense required to

maintain it as a separate force. As an integrated part of the total force it still has a very bright future.

The future combat capability of the Air Force should be built around 80 to 100 combat aircraft (around 50-70 F-18F/G and F-35, and in an ideal world around 25 F-22); supported by Wedgetail airborne early warning and control aircraft, tankers, over-the-horizon radar, and stand-off missiles (such as the JASSM and the AGM-142, *etc.*). The Air Force also needs a wide-area surveillance fleet (manned and unmanned); and a capable transport fleet (C-17, C-130J, and a battlefield airlifter). The Air Force, however, also faces significant challenges with commercial and technological support and with gaining enough full-time and reservist personnel to cover all its roles effectively.

Conclusion

Before we embark on future white paper exercises, there are some fundamental issues that we need to resolve, such as:

- Should we base our strategic policy and force structure on declaratory policy only, or should they really be based on thorough, but highly classified, strategic basis papers?
- Should we have a national security strategy and, if so, what should it cover?

At the very least, we need an integrated series of white papers covering defence, foreign affairs, counter-terrorism, and trade policy, *etc.* These white papers need to be informed by intelligence estimates and perhaps strategic appreciations; and their development and execution should be overseen by a National Security Council reporting to the National Security Committee of Cabinet, thereby guaranteeing a genuine whole-of-government focus. Finally, the augmented Chiefs of Staff Committee (including the Secretary) should steer all the defence aspects of any Defence white paper to ensure adequate professional and intellectual standards.

The Author: Neil James is executive director of the Australia Defence Association, the national public-interest guardian organisation on defence and wider national security issues. Prior to taking up his current position in May 2003, he served for 31 years in the Australian Army. A 1976 graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, his more senior appointments included foundation head of the joint intelligence branch at Headquarters Northern Command in Darwin; foundation director of the army's 'think-tank', the Land Warfare Studies Centre at Duntroon; and head of the operational plans branch at Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand. He also taught at Command and Staff College, the Australian and Canadian defence intelligence schools and on specialist courses with various allied intelligence and security agencies. He has contributed chapters to several books on defence, peacekeeping and human rights law matters, written numerous articles for professional and specialist journals and contributed to the Australian Dictionary of Biography. [Photo of Mr James: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC]