

## **Australia's Defence Policy**

In the nearly three years since the 2016 Defence White Paper<sup>1</sup> was published, Australia's strategic outlook has deteriorated. That paper at p. 17 defined three 'strategic defence interests' to which it gave equal weight: a secure, resilient Australia; a secure nearer region (maritime South East Asia and South Pacific); and a stable Indo-Pacific region and rules-based global order.

The first casualty has been the rules-based global order. Since Vladimir Putin became Russia's leader in 2000, Russia has shown disdain for the global order, claiming it was established by Western nations for their benefit. Russia ignored the global order when it invaded Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). Recently, China has been ignoring the order in the South China Sea. It is establishing a new order designed to protect its interests through its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, its Belt-and-Road Initiative and other programmes. The United States, too, has been selective in which parts of the order it observes, ignoring aspects, like the law of the sea and the laws of armed conflict (see p. 35, this issue), when its interests so dictate.

Secondly, the security of Australia and our nearer region has been challenged by North Korea's 2017 development of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that potentially could deliver a nuclear warhead to Australia or the United States. This has presented both countries, with a strategic dilemma. Sam Roggeveen (pp.13-17) says the United States will either have to accept the new *status quo* or withdraw its military presence from South Korea in return for North Korea scrapping its ICBM. Either way, North Korea is likely to retain its short-range nuclear capability as a hedge against its neighbours.

The security of our nearer region also has been challenged by Russia's and China's growing interest and increasing presence. Jaqueline Westermann (pp. 21-24) says Russia is boosting its regional influence across the Asia-Pacific, which could lead to regional power struggles and we may find ourselves in direct competition with Russia in our backyard.

Australia is already in competition with China in our neighbourhood. Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea signed up to China's Belt-and-Road Initiative earlier this year and, as we reported in June<sup>2</sup>, Vanuatu has allowed China to expand the port of Luganville, which can now host large warships. In November, both China and the United States clashed heatedly at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Port Moresby which, for the first time, was unable to issue a communiqué. Indeed, the 'great game' for influence in the South Pacific, between

China on the one hand and the United States and its allies on the other, is well underway.

Australia, though, is pushing back. In November, to counter the Chinese influence, Australia announced \$3 billion in infrastructure and export financing for the South Pacific and Timor Leste, as well as construction of a joint naval base with Papua New Guinea on Manus Island. China reacted badly to these announcements. This was exacerbated when the United States announced it would join Australia and Papua New Guinea in developing the base.

Closer to home, Indonesia, with ten times our population, is fast-becoming an economic powerhouse and its politics are becoming more militantly Islamic. It is now vital that we include Indonesia in all our defence planning.

At home, cyber espionage and warfare directed against both security organisations and commerce have intensified. Concurrently, Kathryn Toohey (pp. 9-12) says robotic and autonomous systems can now be deployed against Australia and Australia is developing the capability.

The final major development has been the election of an American president who has strong isolationist tendencies and a declared distrust of alliances; coupled with an American electorate increasingly weary of the 'global policeman' burden it has shouldered since World War II. This calls into question the ongoing value of the ANZUS alliance, the bedrock of our defence policy for the last 70 years. It certainly diminishes its deterrent value.

Given the foregoing, if Canberra is not yet working on a revised defence white paper and a national mobilisation plan, it should be. While Australia's three strategic defence interests may not have changed, it is no longer prudent to give them equal weighting. The interests closer to home should be given higher priority than maintenance of the, now disintegrating, global rules-based order. The deployment of expeditionary forces to distant conflicts will become harder to justify as greater needs emerge closer to home.

Further, a defence strategy, grounded solely on the ANZUS alliance, is no longer credible. New partnerships with regional neighbours who share our values and interests are now essential. An independent 'Plan B' also has become essential. Many will argue that this must be nuclear-based. Certainly, a number of allies who heretofore have relied on the American nuclear umbrella are re-considering their position, including Japan and South Korea. If we were to go that route, Indonesia almost certainly would feel compelled to follow suit. While a much bigger conventional defence force, especially a bigger army, would not come cheaply, as a Plan B it may be preferable to an indigenous nuclear deterrent, at least in the shorter term.

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<sup>1</sup>Defence (2016). 2016 *defence white paper* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

<sup>2</sup>Leece, D. R. (2018). China flexes its muscles in the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. *United Service* 69 (2), 7.

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