

The Defence Strategic Review - Strategic Implications

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This paper examines the Australian Defence Strategic Review (DSR) released in April 2023, focusing on the broader geopolitical trends in the Indo-Pacific Region and how it supports the United States' strategy vis-a-vis China. Australian defence strategy has historically been on the premise that Australia's security is best ensured by the presence of a reliable, established, and powerful ally, which involved sending our defence forces for overseas wars and conflicts (forward defence); and the traditional defence approach to defend the nation's borders and their approaches (Defence of Australia). The author opines that the DSR addresses both concepts.

Key words: regional harmony; security zone; air-sea gap; forward defence; Defence of Australia.

Since the release of the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) in April 2023, commentators and academics have been drilling down into its implications for capabilities and strategies. Overall, published analyses have been zooming in on the parts of the DSR that most affect their author's personal interests, roles, or responsibilities. Of course, this is completely understandable. Today, however, I will take a different approach. Instead of zooming on one aspect of the DSR, I will instead zoom out. I will discuss how the DSR relates to broader geopolitical trends in the Indo-Pacific Region and how it supports the United States' strategy vis-à-vis China.

The big picture narrative of the DSR is arguably one of its main limitations. Its conclusions have, by and large, been applauded by the wider Australian defence community. However, how it reached these conclusions is generally rather thin in the DSR. There is a dearth of strategic "story telling" in the DSR. For example, in relation to the US-Australian alliance, the DSR starts out strongly stating that:

No longer is our Alliance partner, the United States, the unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific. Intense China-United States competition is the defining feature of our region and our time. Major power competition in our region has the potential to threaten our interests, including the potential for conflict.¹

It then concludes, as most of the Australian defence community would, that:

...our Alliance with the United States is becoming even more important to Australia. This

will increasingly include working more closely with the United States and other partners.²

However, the proposition that the United States no longer enjoys unipolarity in the Indo-Pacific does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the right course for Australia is to double-down on the alliance. Indeed, the Australian community might rightfully arrive at the opposite conclusion. Why should Australia support the side that is on the decline? Would it not be more prudent and profitable to side with the power that is on the up? To be clear, this is not my view. However, it does highlight a recurring problem in the DSR. That is, between its propositions and conclusions there is often a step missing. The connective tissue is weak or missing all together. The document could be strengthened by an overarching narrative that connects its propositions with its conclusions, so that the document is deductive, logically coherent and has internal validity.

In another example, the DSR correctly states that because the United States no longer enjoys unrivalled primary in the Indo-Pacific, "for the first time in 80 years, we must go back to fundamentals, to take a first-principles approach as to how we manage and seek to avoid the highest level of strategic risk we now face as a nation..."³ before adding that:

Australia's strategic culture has long been based on a major power alliance. Every Australian Government since Federation has assessed our strategic circumstances and reaffirmed the centrality of an alliance partnership in relationship to our strategic interests.⁴

¹DSR p. 23 (1.4)

²DSR p. 45 (6.3)

³DSR p. 24 (1.6)

⁴DSR p. 45 (6.2).

Here, in one breadth it is saying that Australia needs to go back to fundamentals, before, in the next breadth, arguing that an alliance with a great power is central to Australia's defence because it always has been. Once again, I broadly agree with both these propositions, but the way the DSR presents them lacks internal validity. They either do not support each other or, at points, contradict each other.

As a point of comparison, the power of the strategic "storytelling" of the 1986 Dibb Report is outstanding. The Dibb Review is not above criticism, but it is deductive, logically coherent and has internal validity. Consequently, if you explain the main tenets of the Dibb Report (*e.g.*, air-sea gap, concentric circles, 10 year warming time, etc.) to the average person (without any defence knowledge), then ask them what capabilities Australia requires, they will largely arrive at the same mix of capabilities as what Dibb found that the nation required was needed.⁵ This is powerful storytelling and largely explains the report's longevity. The same is not true of the DSR, which risks its longevity and ability to persuade the Australian public and reassure neighbouring countries.

One way to begin to rectify this weakness in the DSR is to place the document within its wider geopolitical setting. In many cases, this helps to fill the gaps in its reasoning. In other words, to take the DSR's own advice and "go back to fundamentals". Today, I will begin by discussing "what great powers want" and how the Australian-American alliance plays into the great power contest in the Indo-Pacific.

What Do Great Powers Want?

The answer to this question is twofold: regional hegemony and a security zone.

For the first century of its existence, the United States' frontiers were amorphous, and it was surrounded by potentially hostile European great powers and relatively formidable native American communities. Without a first-class navy, its maritime trade to Europe happened at the pleasure of the great powers. How did the United States respond? Its approach was two-fold. First, through a combination of the gun and the purse, the United States drove westward pushing the British, French, Spanish and native American nations away from its western borders. While the United States was still marching westward through a mixture of genocide, international wars and

land purchases, the South American countries began winning their independence from the European colonial powers. On 2 December 1823, President James Monroe declared that the US would not meddle in European affairs or those of its colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, any new colonies would be viewed as "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." The Monroe Doctrine did not push out the Europeans, but made it clear that after they were driven out by their former subjects, they were not welcome back.

By the late-18th Century, the United States' relationship with the world began to change once more. It had emerged as the undisputed hegemon of the Western Hemisphere and was insulated from other great powers by two enormous oceans. Hegemony and two oceanic security zones allowed the United States to largely engage – or disengage – with the world on its own terms. With the (partial) exception of its forced entry into World War II, America's 20th Century wars have largely been wars of choice.

The United States achieved hegemony in the Western Hemisphere before dominating the sea (hegemony + security zone). The United States aims were not unique. Britain, another maritime state, first achieved hegemony through the British Isles before dominating the sea (hegemony + security zone). Continental powers have followed a similar trajectory. The Soviet Union stamped its authority over Eastern Europe and create the Soviet Bloc as a security zone (hegemony + security zone). Most great powers that have launched wars for regional domination have failed. France failed under Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte, Germany was beaten in two world wars, and Japan's attempt to establish a hegemonic order in Asia ended in total defeat. The Soviet Union too eventually collapsed. The results of these conflicts were more than minor setbacks. Millions died, these nations' military power was virtually destroyed, and their leaders ended up exiled, imprisoned, or dead. Considering the extreme costs and risks associated with fighting hegemonic wars, in the late-20th Century great powers have been content with a favourable local balance of power. Hegemony, however, is relatively rare. Wars for primacy – and hegemony – are risky. This would be particularly true for China.

So, on the one hand, nothing that China is currently doing should be surprising. Its strategy involves a mix between attempting to compel the region to accept its leadership (hegemony) and creating a security zone. This does not mean, however, that war is inevitable. At this point, American strategy becomes key.

American Strategy

Since 1979, we have lived in a time known as the "the Asian Peace". It has been founded on American military primacy and the willingness of regional powers (namely, Japan and China) to accommodate Washing-

⁵The main tenets could be summarised as: a) Australia faces no serious threat of conventional military attack, b) The SLOC (Sea Lanes of Communication) are secure and will not be threatened, even in war, c) Australia possesses an air-sea gap, d) Concentric circles can be used to balance national interests and power-projection, e) ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, Unites States) Security Treaty provides Australia access to technology far beyond that of its neighbours, and f) Australia needs to be "self-reliant" (i.e., requires the capability to independently respond to low and medium level contingencies).

ton's leadership. Americans, themselves, believed – and in many cases continue to believe – that their primacy was good for Asia's strategic stability, international regional trade, and democracy promotion. In 2011, while Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, declared that Asia "is eager for our leadership and our business... we have underwritten regional security for decades... [because of] our irreplaceable role in the Pacific".

Now, however, as the DSR rightly points out, the era of American primacy has ended. United States' has four broad options:

- **Accommodation:** aims at mutual threat reduction and restraint. It would acknowledge China's interests and seek to accommodate them. To varying degrees, it would accept China's leadership in Asia (if not hegemony or military primacy).
- **Unfavourable Balance of Power in Asia:** Acknowledges that the balance of power has tilted in China's favour. The United States would then work with allies and friends to prevent China's hegemony (across dimensions - strategic, political or economic). It is an anti-hegemonic approach. It seeks to resist, punish and prevent rather than impose or dominate. On the strategic front, it is often related to "denial" strategies.
- **Favourable Balance of Power in Asia:** the United States could attempt to maintain an imbalance in power its favour. It is generally accepted among scholars that this would take more effort than to prevent hegemony. Depending upon China's response, it would lead to competition, arms-races, security dilemma, etc.
- **Continued Primacy:** The United States could attempt to outmatch China's power, roll back its recent gains, before bottling-up Beijing's reduced power and influence.

There are mixed signals to which of these above options the United States will choose. The Trump Administration's National Defence Strategy, for instance, argued that: "the Department of Defense will be prepared to defend the homeland, remain the pre-eminent military power in the world, ensure the balances of power remain in our favor, and advance an international order that is most conducive to our security and prosperity." Yet, the Biden Administration's "Integrated Deterrence" is the latest buzzword in Washington. It argues that all elements of national power need to be integrated across domains (e.g., economic, military, diplomatic across space, cyber, etc.). It also expects far more from allies. It is what a nation would do if it found itself in "unfavourable balance of power" and did not intend to correct it.

At this moment in time, Washington's most likely path will be an acceptance of an unfavourable balance of power in Asia and integrated deterrence (or other

strategy based on similar assumptions) as the solution.

Australian Defence Strategy

Within this geopolitical context, Australian defence strategy begins to converge on one focal point. Australian defence strategy has historically been torn between two forces. The first, is that Australia's security is best ensured by the presence of a great and powerful friend. That is, as long as Britain and, later, the United States ruled the waves through the Indo-Pacific region, then Australia's security was assured. This realisation has been at the foundation of Australia's defence strategy stretching back even before federation. The implication is that the most fundamental of all Australian strategic objectives is to help buttress the position of the friendly regional hegemon, which might mean sending contingents off to fight in far off, and seemingly unimportant, wars in Sudan, South Africa, the Middle East or the battlefields of Europe. This has sometime been called "forward defence", but that term also relates to a specific period of Australian defence history following the Second World War through to the end of the Vietnam War. The foreign defence impulse, however, stretches back much further and continues to exist today.

The second impulse is closer to what we may consider to be a traditional defence approach. That is, to defend the nation's borders and their approaches. Once again, this tradition can be traced back to Federation and right through the subsequent decades; however, it became the dominant approach in the late-1970s and appeared in its fully formed guise in the 1986 Dibb Report and 1987 Defence White Paper. At this point, it became known as Defence of Australia policy. Advocates of the Defence of Australia approach to defence planning often emphasis geography and a wariness of the alliance with the great power. Greater self-reliance is viewed as prudent.

Rarely has one side – either forward defence or defence of Australia – been completely dominant. For the majority of Australia defence history, these two approaches have coexisted with the relative balance see-sawing rather than swinging, completing one way or the other. So, even during Beazley's Defence of Australia era, Australia maintained some interest in projecting power; while similarly during the Robert Hill's war against terror era, the defence of Australia was not entirely extinguished.

Now, however, what we are seeing is a convergence of these two traditions. If Kim Beasley and Paul Dibb had been asked to write the DSR, they would likely have arrived at conclusions similar to those in the report. The fascinating thing is, that if Robert Hill and Alan Dupont had written the report, it would have also likely arrived at similar conclusions. Forward defence and Defence of Australia are

converging. The best way for Australia to help buttress American power in the Indo-Pacific is to secure the bottom link in the chain. Securing the bottom link in the chain looks very similar to the defence of Australia through the Indo-Pacific and Melanesian Arcs.⁶

The Defence of Australia approach never postulated defending Australia on its beaches. It was a layered defence approach. The defence plan was to engage any would-be attacker in Australia's northern approaches with resistance becoming more stringent the closer the fighting got to Australia's shores with the air-sea gap being the focal point of this resistance. The air-sea gap itself was presumed to stretch out 1,000 nm from Australia's coastline, capturing much of the Indonesian archipelago and Melanesia. In other words, the DSR is not a huge departure from this vision of the defence of Australia.

Similarly, however, the DSR is not a huge departure from the forward defence way of thinking. If the ultimate strategic objective is to buttress American power in the Indo-Pacific, this sits well with Washington's integrated deterrence posture where it is asking its allies and security partners to do more in their immediate regions, namely South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia. Together, they create interlocking links in a chain that can be reinforced by United States' forces based in the region or further east across the Pacific. This vision sits comfortably with the "forward defence" approach. When Australian forces have contributed to faraway wars in order to assist in upholding the security guarantor's favourable balance of power (e.g., the Western front in World War Two, through to Korean War, Vietnam War and Afghanistan) generally, Australian forces have been designated an area of responsibility within these conflicts. In a way, this approach could be thought of as scaling up an operational concept used for generations to the geopolitical level.

Similarly, on the maritime front, there is a convergence between two frictions in Australia's security posture.⁷ The Australian Navy has long been pulled in two directions. On the Maritime Strategy (i.e., war-fighting) side of the equation, the Navy has thought hard on how it could contribute to joint operations with its main security partners. This has echoes of the forward defence mindset. On the Maritime Security (i.e., constabulary) side of the equation, the horizon

has been closer. Missions relating to politically stabilising Australia's neighbours, security of the maritime borders (e.g., Operation Sovereign Borders, illegal fishing, etc.) and aiding civilian organisations, have been much closer to home.

Conclusion

In short, the changing geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific mean that whatever one's starting point, the idea that the Australian Defence Force should concentrate its efforts through the maritime South-East Asia and Melanesia and base its operating concept on "denial" capabilities, is where most analysts would have ended up.⁸ Indeed, if told as a story about strategic convergence, most punters would also arrive at similar conclusions and be able to "correctly" describe the broad suite of capabilities Australia now requires to carry out the mission. Like the Dibb Report, the DSR could have been deductive, logically coherent, and internally valid. This was a missed opportunity. For the most part, the DSR either lacked internal validity – as we have seen – or seemed to be undertaking an inductive reasoning (e.g., we are acquiring SSNs and now need to build a strategy around them).

However, we all in the broader defence community still have time to tell this story and help explain why Defence is going to require a greater share of the Federal budget over the coming decades.

The Author

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⁶For further discussion on the importance of the Indo-Pacific and Melanesian arc, see, Adam Lockyer, *Australia's Defence Strategy: Evaluating Alternatives for a Contested Asia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017); Adam Lockyer, "An Australian Defence Policy for a Multipolar Asia," *Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (2015), 273-289.

⁷Richard Dunley, "The End of the 'Lucky Country'? Understanding the Failure of the AUKUS Policy Debate," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 3, (2023), 317-324.

⁸Adam Lockyer and Michael Cohen, "Denial Strategy in Australian Strategic Thought," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 4, (2017), 423-439.