

Australian Defence Strategy and the Defence White Paper 2016

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On 26 February 2016 the government of Australia released its Defence White Paper 2016, the successor to the White Paper issued in early 2013. The Defence White Paper 2009, “Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030,” established as a policy objective a schedule for the release of White Papers at approximately five-year intervals. Adherence to the schedule has permitted the expectations created in 2009 to be further developed for implementation. When these documents are read together, it is clear that the strategy remains sound and is being methodically implemented.

While territorial security has been the traditional justification for maintenance of defence forces, the Australian government has recognized that the “Australian strategic outlook over the coming decades will continue to be shaped by the changing global distribution of economic, political and military power, and by the future role and weight of the United States.”¹ In addition to acknowledging the role of the United States in the region, “Force 2030” identified strategic interests as the security of Australia and its immediate neighbourhood, the stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and maintenance of rules-based order in the world.² The rules-based international order includes the economic system that is essential to facilitate not just Australia’s prosperity, but also world trade and economic prosperity.

The Defence White Paper 2013 expanded the country’s security interests from the Asia-Pacific region to include the Indo-Pacific region.³ The Defence White Paper 2016 defined, as had earlier White Papers, the country’s strategic interests as:

1. A secure, resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication;
2. A secure nearer region, encompassing maritime South-east Asia and the South Pacific; and
3. A stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.⁴

The emphasis upon maritime security and a rules-based global order has been the subject of presentations and discussions by defence leaders and thinkers in Australia for years. Unlike the case in other countries, there appears to be unanimous agreement by the three Australian Chiefs of Service that maritime strategy is the kernel of the defence strategy and the overall security strategy for their country.

The Sea Power Conference hosted by the Royal Australian Navy in 2013 illustrated this nicely. Vice-Admiral Ray Griggs, the Australian Chief of Navy, addressed the conference and reviewed the increasing role of naval forces as the practitioners of naval diplomacy. This is because humanity is increasingly using the maritime environment for trade and resource

harvesting. As a result, national economies are more closely linked than ever and “the influence of the global maritime trading system is all persuasive.”⁵ The Admiral concluded his speech with several thoughts. First, he noted that no one state has the capacity to protect its own maritime interests because of the global character of the maritime system.⁶ Second, he noted that good order at sea is based on a rules-based system that benefits all states.⁷ And, finally, he noted that:

Mahan, Corbett, Cable, Booth, and others could not have reasonably understood the challenges that we face today and into the future. In Australia there is an emerging school of maritime strategic thought that challenges traditional continental and expeditionary schools of thought.⁸

The global circumstances of today seem to take us beyond the theories outlined by these maritime strategists. But there is still a rule-based maritime system, and states will have to create and maintain maritime forces that observe and enforce such rules.

The Admiral’s thoughts were reinforced by Lieutenant General David Morrison, the Chief of Army, who said,

Our trade flows freely, our petrol stations are replenished, our supermarket shelves are full to meet our whims and our commerce flourishes. Yet, Australians collectively do not reflect on the enormous national investment involved in sustaining the maritime conditions for that happy state of affairs, nor do they consider overly that much of it is also underwritten by the United States as the leading power of our age.⁹



An Anzac-class frigate of the Royal Australian Navy, HMAS Perth, 6 October 2013.

Credit: Hpeterswald/Wikimedia Commons

The General attributed this “cognitive failure”¹⁰ to a strategic mindset set in continentalism.

A spokesman for the Australian Chief of Air Force stated that the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is “alert to the fact that Australia’s strategic context is one defined by its maritime circumstances.”¹¹ Thus, there is unity amongst the service chiefs on defence and security strategy.

This shared vision of the importance of the maritime environment to security means that Australia has incentive/opportunity to enhance its ability for its military forces to operate jointly, something other states have struggled to do. As Admiral Griggs said at the Sea Power Conference, “Australia, like many nations, has been on a journey to build joint (maritime) forces.”¹²

While the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) have an overarching role in the maintenance of maritime security, there are many security activities that are handled through other federal departments or agencies or contracted parties. Immigration and border services have specific responsibilities with respect to people smuggling and the importation of illegal goods and substances. Marine search and rescue services are contracted out to civilian companies. Australian Federal Police enforce criminal laws. Maritime security is a whole-of-government effort.

Beyond national territories and maritime areas, the ADF may operate either independently or in cooperation with allies or friendly states. Such activities may be led by Australia, or an ally or another state. The operations may range from combat, through anti-piracy operations in the northern Indian Ocean-Persian Gulf areas, to peacekeeping in East Timor, or the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Pacific Ocean islands such as Fiji. With active force strength of about 58,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women, the ADF can only do so much independently. Therefore the participation of allies and friendly countries is crucial in most extra-territorial operations, exercises and training.

The three White Papers discuss procurement at some length. Alliances and joint programs fulfill a wide range of military and naval needs, including intelligence gathering and sharing, science and technology research, and equipment. The procurement of naval surface vessels and submarines from Australian shipyards is provided for. This permits the Australian government to use national business enterprises where appropriate and to buy key components, technology, aircraft, or other military equipment offshore. This procurement strategy assists in the development of close relationships with national and international suppliers and countries.

Over the period from 2009 through 2016 there has been consistency in the number and types of ships and aircraft to be procured for service through the 2030s. The future fleet will include the two *Canberra*-class landing ships, which have just entered service, as the initial units, plus three anti-air warfare destroyers that are in the advanced stages of construction, 12

advanced patrol submarines to replace the *Collins*-class, nine new frigates to replace the *Anzac*-class, two new replenishment ships, plus new ocean patrol vessels, mine warfare vessels and hydrographic vessels. New helicopters – MH30R Seahawks – are entering service starting this year. As well, 15 P8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft will be procured in three tranches to replace the existing P3 Orion fleet.¹³ The Australian Army will procure amphibious equipment to equip an infantry battalion landing group.

It is important to note that there is a funding plan for the program, which is apparently to remain in place regardless of changes in government.¹⁴ The Australian government, with broad support of its citizens, continues to be a significant participant and supporter of the rules-based maritime global order. Its armed forces continue to strengthen their competencies to maintain global maritime order in geographic areas of strategic interest. 🇺🇸

Notes

1. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence, “Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030,” Defence White Paper 2009, p. 30.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45.
3. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence, “Defending Australia and its National Interests,” Defence White Paper 2013, pp. 24-27.
4. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence, Defence White Paper 2016, p. 68.
5. “Naval Diplomacy and Maritime Power Projection,” Proceedings of the Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Conference 2013, Australia, 2014, p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence, Defence White Paper 2016, pp. 76-90.
14. Commonwealth of Australia, 2016 Integrated Investment Program.

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