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Defense Policy

Australia's New Defence White Paper: Serious, But Working in an Uncertain Climate

Analysis. From GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Canberra Staff. Embattled Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard on May 3, 2013, unveiled Australia's new *Defence White Paper*, a year ahead of its originally-scheduled release. It was a substantially more serious document than the 2009 *Defence White Paper*, and began to get to grips with the realities of Australia in the new strategic environment, particularly with regard to how Australia should, in a sense, "choose" between its alliance with the US and its growing relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The authors of the new *White Paper* were skillfully guided by a non-Defence Dept. project leader who understood that the paper had to meet the Gillard Government's commitment to constraining defense spending. Yet, despite this, the *White Paper* still provided scope for a creative and realistic approach to the strategic threat environment, and the need for some new capabilities. In that sense, the Paper was a well-crafted balancing act, and with that in mind, the Opposition — under Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott, who seemed likely to become Prime Minister after the September 2013 elections — appeared to have little substantive criticism of the new *White Paper*. This was almost certainly because Mr Abbott was aware that he would have a difficult time raising defense spending under his new Administration, in the short term, given the absolute destruction of the Exchequer by Ms Gillard's spend-and-spend approach to buying votes.

But it was also true that the Opposition had few creative ideas as to how to challenge the strategic framework of Australia's areas of interests, as outlined by the apolitical framers of the new *White Paper*. The Liberal-National Party Coalition, which was almost overwhelmingly favored to come to office in September 2013, has said little about how it would realistically address the transformation of US global strategic power and the rise of the PRC's capabilities and interests, as well as, indeed, those of India.

Indeed, the Opposition could not challenge one of the growing foundations of Australian defense and strategic policy, which calls for greater military and military-industrial cooperation with Japan, and, perforce, South Korea (RoK).

But the reality will be more complex than that.

It has been known for some time that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) would swing back to closer engagement in the closer region around the Continent, following withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. The document makes a strong statement of intent to deepen relations with Indonesia and re-invest in defense cooperation with Papua New Guinea (reviving the earlier Defence Cooperation strategy which Australia had with PNG and the South Pacific). Along with the growing strategic relationship with Japan, these three relationships — Japan, Indonesia, and the PNG — could easily be fast-tracked at little dollar cost.

More, however, would need to be done to think through the idea of an “Indo-Pacific strategic arc”, but that’s a far more realistic way to think about Australian interests than the Gillard Government’s simplistic and populist approach in its *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, released in October 2012. Indeed, more would need to be done in line with the 2009 study, *Such a Full Sea: Australia’s Options in a Changing Indian Ocean Region*¹, which outlined — well in advance of the present Gillard Government’s approach, exactly the transformations now becoming evident in the Indo-Pacific region. But the framers of the new *Defence White Paper* were aware of that — and the Indian Ocean study — and began to move Defence Dept. thinking toward realistic considerations of Australia’s interests in Africa, the Middle East, and the Northern Tier, as well as in Europe and Latin America.

Most importantly, the *White Paper* also finally tackles the question — much talked around instead of about in Australia — of having to choose between the PRC and the US as a strategic partner. Neither state wants Australia to choose, nor is it in Australian strategic interests to do so for the immediate or foreseeable future (not that the “foreseeable future” is necessarily a very long period).

Judgments about the longevity and value of the US’ strategic role in the Asia-Pacific have clearly been examined and the conclusion unsurprisingly reached that the ANZUS alliance (Australia, New Zealand, US) remained central to Australian interests. But the *White Paper*’s authors did not take the opportunity to advocate a speeding-up of cooperation by Australia with the US on Marine Corps and US Air Force and Navy deployments to Australia. It may be that the US itself signified quietly — as it did at the AUSMIN joint US-Australia ministerial meetings in Perth in November 2012 — that it did not wish to push ahead as keenly on expanding these deployments as Canberra had hoped.

But there were positive statements in the policy paper about opportunities for new cooperation with the US in areas of “space”, which is, essentially, a new term in “cyber power”, and on ballistic missile defense.

Military capabilities-wise, the 2013 *Defence White Paper* reprises much of the ground covered in the Force Posture review study of 2012.

All told, the strategic positioning of the ADF in the *White Paper* represents what Canberra defense insiders have called — with some relief — “a balanced and sensible approach”. Much of the regional engagement activity advocated is low-cost but high-value, which is right focus for Defence, given its budget constraints at the moment. The *White Paper*’s strategic assessment is by far the most professional statement of the present Government’s approach to regional security that has been seen. The budget picture however, remains poor for Defence, notwithstanding a small injection of funding to pay for the acquisition of Boeing E/A-18G *Growler* electronic warfare aircraft [see below].

In military structure/hardware terms:

1. Australia remained committed to buying the advanced Lockheed- Martin/BAE F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, but had slipped acceptance dates for the bulk of the initial force (of 14 aircraft) so that the F-35 would not be in Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) service until 2020, creating a capabilities gap in the force structure;
2. The RAAF would, as expected, buy an additional 12 Boeing *Super Hornets*, configured in the E/A-18G electronic warfare *Growler* version, giving the RAAF a total of 36 F-18 *Super Hornets* in total, gradually replacing the basic F/A-18 (basic) *Hornets* as they end their service lives. The *Growler* acquisition, although much touted by Defence Minister Stephen Smith, does not compensate for the delay in the F-35 acquisition, but the Government and ADF are aware that the F-35 program itself is becoming problematic from a cost and capability standpoint;
3. The Government committed to buying 12 new submarines, based on an evolved version of the Royal Australian Navy’s (RAN) six existing *Collins*-class SSKs. The Government also ruled out buying an existing model of submarine from a European manufacturer because none of these matches the capability even of the existing *Collins*-class boats. There is, although not mentioned openly, the chance of cooperation with Japan on submarine technology, presupposing a change in Japanese defense technology export rules;
4. The RAN supply ships HMAS *Sirius* and HMAS *Success* would, under terms outlined in the *White Paper*, be replaced;

5. The Government plans to accelerate plans to replace the RAN's marginally-successful, aluminum-hulled *Armidale*-class patrol boats;
6. No plans were announced in the document for a fourth air warfare destroyer (AWD), although this was still seen as probable.

Overall, the *Defence White Paper* of 2013 was far more conciliatory toward the PRC than the 2009 *White Paper*, something which brought an immediate and positive response from Beijing. Indeed, the Government, through the document, welcomed the PRC's rise and the modernization of its military as a legitimate outcome of Chinese growth.

Unlike the 2009 *White Paper*, new document makes no commitment to a particular level of defense funding, given that, as a percentage of GDP, Australian defense spending is at its lowest level since the 1930s, when the country was regarded as virtually defenseless. However the Government did hint — outside the *White Paper* context, and therefore with no real commitment — that it would like to move back toward a spending level of two percent of GDP. Spending would, given inflation, rise in absolute terms, however. Indeed, the Government, in the document, argued that since 2000, defense spending had been consistently under two percent of GDP.

It is ironic that the Gillard Government, which has maintained that Australia's economic performance was unparalleled in the industrialized world — which was not true, and, indeed, Australia has been de-industrializing, in any event — and yet it now talked in terms of constrained defense spending in a constrained economic environment.

The document also noted: "The Government remains committed to maintaining an ADF workforce of approximately 59,000 Permanent [ie: uniformed] members [not including Reservists], noting that in the aftermath of the drawdown from Afghanistan, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste, retention will be a challenge."

Where the new Australian *Defence White Paper* is solid and professional, it is the work of a polished team of analysts; and this iteration — unlike the 2009 document — appeared to minimize the blatantly political aspects. It still served to make the case to minimize the need for increased defense spending, and it minimized the potential challenge which the PRC could make to Australian interests, unlike the 2009 document, which took a view that Australia would inevitably have to face a regionally-dominant PRC.

In some respects, the 2013 Australian *Defence White Paper* took a "terrain neutral" view of the future, not betting on which way the global balance would change, other than the obvious observation that the US was to be more challenged in capabilities in the near term by rising PRC reach. It paid lip-service to the growing significance of cyber-space, but did not add granularity to the Australian debate as to how to address this strategic arena. We do know that Australian plans to create an integrated governmental capacity — including Defence — to address cyber threats have essentially foundered for the time being.

The *White Paper* did reference the myriad of other governmental papers on national security, but what has become apparent is that Canberra — as Washington, DC — has in some senses begun to confuse studies with action, and sees white papers as a collegial method of avoiding leadership and direct responsibility. The new document, for all that it has a far more keen grip on reality than some of its predecessor reports, does not address some of the failures and internal schisms about what is necessary to prosecute national security goals.

The way, for example in which the recent decision was made to acquire 10 C-27J *Spartan* twin-engine light transports for the RAAF was a case in point. Clearly, this represented a victory for the Air Force over the Army, which probably would have been better served for its in-theater needs with more CH-47D *Chinook* helicopters. But the Air Force has fixed wing assets; the Army the rotary wing. The decision was made, then, more on political grounds than practical.

The *White Paper* showed Australian Defence fighting a rear-guard action to retain capability, but also reflected the Government's lack of a clear view of the future.

Footnotes:

1. Copley, Gregory R.; and Pickford, Andrew: *Such a Full Sea: Australia's Options in a Changing Indian Ocean Region*. Melbourne, 2009: SidHarta Publishers. ISBN: 978-1-921362-62-0.

South Sudan's Dilemma: Instant Gratification or a Longer-Term Sense of Identity

Analysis. By GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Staff in Juba. Early May 2013 found South Sudan ready to move forward to start a new phase in the nation's building and development, but facing schisms based around short-term tribalism *versus* longer-term national interests.

See

"South Sudan Pres. Kiir Moves to Stop Arab-Backed Initiative by Vice-Pres. Machar to Polarize and Split the New State", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [April 29, 2013](#).

"South Sudan: A Case of Misunderstanding Juba", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [April 22, 2013](#).

Several major events which took place during April 2013 clearly demonstrated that a major threshold had finally been crossed. Among these events was Sudanese Pres. Omar al-Bashir's visit to Juba in which he formally accepted the reality of an independent, sovereign South Sudan. Also of significance was the agreement on the resumption of oil exports under conditions guaranteeing revenues for South Sudan (unlike the Sudanese embezzlement of revenues during the autonomy period and soon after independence).

South Sudan Pres. Salva Kiir Mayardit was to visit Port Sudan, on the Red Sea in neighboring Sudan, before the end of May 2013 in order to inaugurate the oil exports.

Domestically, the launch within South Sudan by Pres. Kiir of a genuine domestic reconciliation program (after the abusive politicization of the first attempt) gave great hope for the future. As well, the renewed amnesty issued by Pres. Kiir in late April 2013 was beginning to have impact. For example, the peace-making with one of the largest remaining rebel groups – the 3,000 fighter-strong South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA) led by Brig.-Gen. Bapiny Monytuel – demonstrated that the national reconciliation was being implemented in action and not just words.

David Yau Yau is the only remaining major warlord still resisting the Government. However, some 1,000 fighters of the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), the largest active rebel group Yau Yau is associated with, have already accepted the amnesty and began surrendering their weapons.

These major developments should have galvanized the entire official Juba into extra effort to capitalize on them in order to further the national interest. Yet, not everybody in official Juba is equally committed to the common good. Vice-Pres. Riek Machar and his camp continue to give precedence to the Nuer ethnic group's "instant gratification" interests: that is, maximizing oil revenues from exports via the Sudan pipeline over the long-term national interest of exporting via neutral venues. In so doing, Machar has been seen as harming the long-term national interest on the eve of Pres. Kiir's important visit to Sudan and his ability to guarantee best conditions for South Sudanese oil exports.

Ultimately, Machar has also been seen as harming the long-term interests of his own Nuer, given that the Nuer are an integral and important part of the nation of South Sudan, and their fate and fortunes are indivisible from these of all other South Sudanese, whatever their tribe might be.

Several senior professionals in Juba (many of whom are neither Dinka nor Nuer, both in and out of government) have expressed concern to *GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs* about the impact which the rising strain at the top could have on South Sudan's surge forward. In their opinion, it was impossible to ignore tribal background, roots, and identity in contemporary Africa. The pre-eminence of tribal heritage and identity would not, they believe, disappear within the next few generations. Yet, modern Africa has been increasingly successful in finding practical and pragmatic ways to balance and reconcile between the interests of tribe and state. Such working compromises would inevitably seem to remain the core of modern African politics in the foreseeable future.

In the case of South Sudan, these senior professionals contend, this meant that the Nuer, being the second largest tribal group in the country, deserved a very senior position such as the Vice-President. However, they wonder, is Riek Machar the only qualified Nuer politician or leader? Would it be really impossi-

ble for the Nuer to empower another leader who would put the furthering of the national interest ahead of his own personal agenda and ambitions, or ahead merely of the perceived narrow interests of his tribe?

This was neither, they felt, “mission impossible”, nor an unreasonable expectation. After all, the key here was to find a politically mature leader who would not deprive one group or another of legitimate access to power in Juba.
