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Australia's Defence Update 2007: Implications for Southeast Asia

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PRIME MINISTER John Howard launched *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007* in Canberra on 5 July 2007. Like its predecessors in 2003 and 2005, this paper is a review of the balance of concepts, capabilities and forces to meet Australia's strategic challenges and military commitments. The Australian Government has made some major defence decisions recently, and this latest Update seeks to provide the justification for those decisions. It thus has a flavour of what military staff college students refer to as "situating the appreciation", or others might call "putting the cart before the horse".

Significant decisions on the future size and shape of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) include the acquisition of major new capabilities: a squadron of F/A-18F Super Hornets as an interim measure until the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) comes on line; C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft; three Air Warfare destroyers based on the Spanish F-100 design; two new large amphibious ships also based on a Spanish design; and 59 M1A1 Abrams tanks together with a large expansion of the Australian Army under the 'Enhanced Land Force' initiative. This is about AUD\$41 billion of major defence initiatives. The recent Federal Budget in Australia provided for defence expenditure of AUD\$22 billion in 2007-2008 – an increase of 10.6 per cent over the previous year.

As public support for Australia's military involvement in Iraq had fallen markedly during the past year, the new Update was also under more pressure than its predecessors to provide strategic justification for that involvement. It reviews Australia's security and broader national interests in the Middle East and states that "Australia will continue to honour our obligations to the Iraqi people, and help them in building a more stable future". However, some government uncertainty over that justification became evident immediately after the paper's release when Defence Minister Brendan Nelson said oil was a major factor while Prime Minister Howard said it was not.

The Strategic Environment

The Update sets out Australia's strategic outlook. It acknowledges that while Australia faces no direct conventional threat, the risks of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, fragile states, and the changing nature of the use of force all contribute to a dynamic security environment. The Update argues that the Middle East is the intersection of many of these trends and hence there is a need for Australia to be involved in that region. It stresses the importance of strategic relationships not only with existing allies through the alliance with the United States, and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), but also with nations such as Japan, Indonesia and India.

The Update identifies two basic factors that are shaping Australia's defence outlook. These are the continuing predominance of the US, and secondly, the security impact of globalisation. While

globalisation has brought many benefits, the associated interconnectedness between countries has helped the spread of extremist movements and disease.

Globalist School in Strategic Debate

In the last year or so, a significant strategic debate has emerged in Australia and to some extent, this is reflected in the new Update. On the one hand, there is the Defence of Australia (DOA) school of strategic thinking that has prevailed since the Dibb Review of the mid-1980s, which followed in the wake of President Nixon's Guam Doctrine that allies of the US had to do more for their own defence. For this school, the sea-air gap to the North of Australia was the focus of Defence doctrine with priority accorded to air and maritime forces. This approach reached its zenith with a clear statement in the 2000 *Defence White Paper* of the need for a maritime strategy to defend Australia.

Land force advocates were not happy with the DOA school because, effectively, the Australian Army was allocated a secondary function to "clean up" any forces that might succeed in crossing the sea-air gap. However, all that changed with 9/11 and the heavy involvement of Australian forces in the Middle East, as well as in other peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations, particularly in the South Pacific.

A new "Globalist" school of strategic thinking has emerged that sees Australia's security as determined by events at the global level. It tries to discredit the DOA school as a "value-free" approach to national security and argues against geography as a primary strategic determinant. Rather security should be primarily about defending values and interests even though this might require military commitments a long way from home. The expanded Australian Army and the acquisition of the C-17 Globemaster aircraft, the Abrams tanks and the large amphibious ships reflect this approach.

Australia's Defence Policy

However, the new Update still contains much DOA thinking as a fundamental requirement of Australia's Defence Policy. It stresses the importance of both the self-reliant defence of Australia and the ability to control the sea and air approaches. It identifies a need for Australian forces to maintain a leading edge in its military forces against increasingly sophisticated regional forces.

In a clear concession to the enduring importance of geography, the paper notes the need to be able to deter and limit the options of potential adversaries in Australia's area of "paramount defence interest". The latter area is defined as including "the archipelago and the maritime approaches to Australia to our west, north and east, the islands of the South Pacific as far as New Zealand, our island territories and the southern waters down to Antarctica". This is the area where according to the Update, Australia must lead with maintaining peace and stability.

The Update then identifies the importance of Australia being able to work with allies and friends to promote a peaceful global strategic environment. While both the Middle East and Asia-Pacific are considered vital to Australia's interests, the paper recognizes that military contributions to coalition efforts in those regions will be tailored to the circumstances. The nature of the Defence involvement in each region could vary widely. This requires a robust military force able to deal with many tasks and roles. It is a very "open-ended" strategic requirement, which has led to the current over-commitment of the ADF with its involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, as well as smaller commitments elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa, and a heavy involvement in maritime border protection.

Implications for Southeast Asia

There are two somewhat contradictory implications of the latest Australian Defence Update for Southeast Asia. The first is the lower priority accorded to engagement in that region relative to the Middle East and the South Pacific. There is only a passing reference to FPDA. The main observation on the region is that internal security and the risks of domestic instability will be the most pressing regional security issues in the next few years.

The second implication arises from the rather “hawkish” flavour to the Update. In clear support for power projection, expeditionary littoral operations, and interventionist capabilities, the paper notes that the new large amphibious ships will provide a greatly improved ability to act decisively “around Australia and throughout the region”. Similarly, it refers to the need for the Navy to be able “to establish sea control and operate freely within our region, while denying such freedoms to an opponent”. In neither instance is “the region” defined although in common usage, it must be taken to include at least the more proximate parts of Southeast Asia. Paradoxically, Southeast Asia might have been more comfortable with the DOA doctrine rather than with Australia seeking a role as a “regional security leader” that will defend Australia’s interests and values.

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