

Chapter 1

The Self-Reliant Defence of Australia: The History of an Idea

Paul Dibb

For much of Australia's history, there has been a deeply-held view that Australia was a vulnerable country incapable of defending itself. This sense of vulnerability reflected a keen awareness that Australia was a large, sparsely populated continent rich in agricultural land and resources. The colony was located on the other side of the world from its British origins and fears of a foreign invasion surfaced at various times during the nineteenth century.¹

As David Horner points out, from the earliest days the Australian colonists were concerned for their security and it was partly the desire for collective defence that drove the early colonial governments towards Federation in 1901. Tension, however, soon arose between two strands in Australian defence policy, later described in a shorthand way as 'fortress Australia' versus 'forward defence' (though in the early twentieth century it was the 'Australianists' versus the 'imperialists').² But when Japan threatened Australia with invasion in the Second World War, the fears that Australia could not defend itself without help from a large ally were starkly confirmed. After the war, this perspective led to the policy of 'forward defence' that saw Australian expeditionary forces fighting communism in Korea and Vietnam alongside the United States, as well as in Malaya with the British and in Borneo during the Confrontation. It was only during the 1970s, following America's defeat in Vietnam, that the need for the self-reliant 'defence of Australia' emerged as a serious proposition.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to provide a comprehensive history of the 'defence of Australia' idea. Instead it will focus on the last 30 years since the publication of the 1976 Defence White Paper *Australian Defence*, in which the government of the day moved distinctly away from 'forward defence' towards policies that required a force structure which—for the first time in Australia's history—was to be primarily driven by the need to be able to defend the continent unaided. I will address four main policy issues:

- A summary of defence policy developments leading to *Australian Defence*.
- The reasons for the Dibb Review and the new policy delivered in the 1987 *Defence of Australia*.

- The Howard Government's 2000 Defence White Paper (*Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*) and what elements it contained of continuity and change.
- Finally, I shall explore whether the Howard Government has now disposed of 'defence of Australia' in favour of an ADF structured primarily as an expeditionary force.

But before I begin, let me make some important clarifications. The so-called 'defence of Australia' doctrine never focused solely on the defence of the continent itself: it also envisaged Australian forces operating further afield (albeit in limited numbers) if national interests required it. And the idea of self-reliance never meant self-sufficiency. It is important to recall that major factors in the need to develop concepts for defending Australia were the British withdrawal from east of Suez and President Richard Nixon's Guam doctrine that America's friends should be able to defend themselves against all but a major attack with their own combat forces.

It is also necessary to point out that while there have been two opposing and long-standing schools of thought in Australian defence policy, sometimes leading to bitter disagreements, the fact is that neither of them seems likely to completely drop the 'defence of Australia' doctrine or, indeed, the need to be able to operate alongside the United States in certain circumstances in theatres well beyond Australia's own region. There remain, of course, important differences of priorities, but it seems unlikely that any Australian political party now will declare that the defence of Australia is not the first duty of government. The idea that Australia should be able to defend itself has taken firm root in public opinion.³

The Foundations of the 'Defence of Australia' Idea

One of the earliest proposals regarding Australia's defence came from Field Marshal Kitchener, who was invited by the Commonwealth Government in 1910 to prepare a memorandum on the defence of Australia. His conclusions were based around the proposal that Australia's land forces should be organised on the basis that an enemy contemplating an invasion of a sufficiently credible scale would be unable to evade British naval forces that Australia assumed would always be available. This led him to estimate the land forces required at 80 000 fighting troops, half of which would be required to secure the largest cities and to defend ports from attack, while the other half would be free to operate as a mobile striking force anywhere in Australia.⁴ The First World War then intervened and during the 1920s and 1930s there was heated debate about the merits of planning for a future invasion as distinct from low-level threats (including raids.)⁵

However, the rise of Japan and the direct threat of invasion to Australia in the Second World War again put paid to any serious consideration of how Australia itself might be defended without the assistance of a great and powerful ally. The first post-war review of Australia's strategic circumstances was undertaken in 1946. It concluded that 'the size of this country demands for its defence armed forces and an industrial potential quite beyond our present capacity'.⁶ There was some thought given to local defence, but it was considered that the requirements for such could be met by those forces contributing to Empire Cooperation.

In 1947, the security deriving from Australia's isolation was noted, as was the security provided by geography: 'her geographical position is such that no hostile power, without possessing command of the sea and local air superiority could successfully invade Australia.'⁷ In the 1950 assessment of the basis for Australia's defence policy, geographical isolation continued to be seen as fundamental to Australia's security. During the 1950s, Australia's defence priorities were seen as having sufficient forces at all times to ensure the security of Australia, but with a greater focus on possible military activity in the Southeast Asian region and adjacent areas. It was assessed that while the line against communism was held in Indochina, defence in-depth was provided for the Australia-New Zealand main support area.⁸ The strategic perception of developments in Southeast Asia, especially the communist insurgencies, largely reflected this continuing preoccupation. Three successive lines of Australian defence were envisaged: (1) support for the defence of the Indo-Chinese mainland; (2) should this fail, the implementation of contingency plans to defend Malaya; and (3) consideration for the immediate defence of the Northwest approaches to Australia depending 'on the probable form and scale of attack at any given time'.⁹

By 1959 Australia's defence planners were beginning to think in terms of shaping forces for the defence of Australia independently of allies.¹⁰ It was stated that, in certain circumstances, 'Australia might have to rely completely on her own defensive and economic capacity for an indeterminate period'. Consequently, it was assessed that our forces should be designed primarily with the ability to act independently of allies.¹¹ This approach was rejected by Cabinet, which insisted that Australia should be prepared for involvement in limited war in Southeast Asia and its forces should have, as far as possible, the necessary organisation and techniques to operate effectively with major allies.¹²

It was not until the 1960s that the political leadership was even prepared to entertain tentative ideas for the defence of Australia itself. This reflected the fact that (as already mentioned) in 1967 the British Government decided on withdrawing its forces east of Suez and the 1969 statement by President Nixon that America's allies in the Pacific had to be able to defend themselves against

all but a major attack. Thus the 1967 *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy* recognised that Australia must be prepared to deal with situations 'which directly threaten our territorial interests and which we could not reasonably rely on receiving help from our allies'.¹³

By 1970, the Minister for Defence, Malcolm Fraser, was arguing that his aim was to achieve forces which were organised, equipped and trained for the direct defence of Australia, and for effective employment in the region of which Australia was a part.¹⁴ The 1971 *Strategic Basis* paper thus recognised clearly that Australia needed to pursue her own security interests far more: it proposed that 'more emphasis than hitherto should be given to the continuing fundamental obligations of continental defence'.¹⁵ Studies were undertaken on maritime air, air defence, strategic transport, and defence communications and infrastructure, and it was envisaged that in most instances we would see Australian forces operating as a joint force complementary to each other.

Elements of this new policy appeared in the 1972 public document *Australian Defence Review*, which argued for a more independent national defence capability and for self-reliance as laying 'claim to being a central feature in the future development of Australia's defence policy'.¹⁶ The big breakthrough, however, was the 1973 *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy* which set the course followed, by and large, up to the late 1980s. It asserted that Australia 'must now assume the primary responsibility for its own defence against any neighbourhood or regional threats'.¹⁷ Recognition was given to the fundamental requirements that flowed from the enduring features of Australia's geographic circumstances. In particular, it identified the importance of capabilities for surveillance; naval and maritime air defence; long-range transport; responses to hostile landings; defence infrastructure and communication networks; comprehensive intelligence; and industrial, scientific and technological support. A comprehensive study of continental defence was also recommended.

The problem was that the Service chiefs disputed the content and direction of this assessment and its process of preparation. The newly created Defence Organisation was riven by disputes over how strategic guidance should be prepared and by whom. In 1973, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) was carpeted by the then Defence Minister, Mr Lance Barnard, to explain why he had publicly refuted the 1973 *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy* after it had been endorsed by the government (and, incidentally, not dissented from by the CGS in the Defence Committee). The classified 1974 *Defence of Australia* study, which had very limited circulation within the Defence Organisation, was so controversial that it was ordered to be destroyed by the Secretary. It examined scenarios in which Australia might be threatened by a major power and situations in which it might be directly attacked by a lesser power. The 1974 study also addressed contingencies in which Australia might be involved in military conflict with

Indonesia, either directly or through support for Papua New Guinea (PNG). It canvassed options for Australia to acquire its own nuclear weapons, even though Australia had ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1969.

Specific requirements for the independent defence of Australia were further examined in 1975. The various threads of defence planning that had been emerging gradually during the previous decade were drawn together. In particular, the concept of a 'core force' was devised. A 'core force' would be suited to undertaking peacetime tasks, sufficiently versatile to deter or cope with a range of low-level contingencies against Australia, and with relevant skills and equipment capable of timely expansion to deter or meet a developing situation.¹⁸

A series of studies was proposed, beginning with the low-level contingencies which were considered credible in the short term, and subsequently moving to higher-level situations. These studies were to be guided predominantly by the physical characteristics of the country and its geography. In 1976, the value of contingency studies, in providing a sound basis for prudent defence insurance against future uncertainty, was reaffirmed and a series of possible low-level contingencies was put forward to help inform the shaping of the force structure in the Five Year Defence Program.

In the event, a clearly articulated independent Australian defence policy was not released to the public until the Fraser Government's seminal 1976 Defence White Paper, *Australian Defence*. This White Paper argued that the area of Australia's primary strategic concern was the adjacent maritime area—the countries and territories of the Southwest Pacific, PNG, Indonesia and the Southeast Asia region. It contended that, for practical purposes, the requirements and scope for Australian defence activity should be limited essentially to these areas closer to home. With regard to Australia's defence requirements, it argued that the primary requirement was for increased self-reliance:

We no longer base our policy on the expectation that Australia's Navy or Army or Air Force will be sent abroad to fight as part of some other nation's force, supported by it. We do not rule out an Australian contribution to operations elsewhere if the requirement arose and we felt our presence would be effective, and if our forces could be spared from their national tasks. But we believe that any operations are much more likely to be in our own neighbourhood than in some distant theatre, and that our Armed Forces will be conducting joint operations together as the Australian Defence force.¹⁹

This was a revolutionary breakthrough in independent Australian strategic thinking. And subsequent classified defence documents confirmed the priority that should continue to be given to the independent defence of Australia. For

example, the 1979 *Strategic Basis* paper emphasised the importance of Australia being able to demonstrate that it was serious and competent in defence matters, and capable of responding effectively to low-level pressures or military attacks and of timely expansion in response to more substantial threats. And the 1983 *Strategic Basis* paper gave priority to the development of military capabilities appropriate to the independent defence of Australia. It accorded priority in terms of equipment acquisition, training and infrastructure development to the requirements of contingencies considered credible in the shorter term 'including deterrence of such escalation as an enemy might be capable of'.²⁰

But none of these documents (either classified or in the public domain) was able to set out in specific terms the force structure priorities for the self-reliant 'defence of Australia'. The nub of the problem, of course, was the challenge of determining what should drive Australia's force structure in the absence of a specific threat. And at the heart of this challenge was the need to specify actual force structure priorities within an affordable budget. That took almost another decade—until 1986.

The Practical Implementation of the 'Defence of Australia' Doctrine

The central issue here was not a lack of hard work. Both within the Defence Organisation and in the SDSC, there was much detailed articulation of the problems of defending Australia.²¹ In fact, the largest proportion of the SDSC's work in the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s concerned the defence of Australia. In many ways the Centre was at the forefront of the conceptual revolution in Australian defence policy from 'dependence on great and powerful friends' to 'greater self-reliance' and from 'forward defence' to 'defence of Australia'.

The first major step in this process was a conference organised by Robert O'Neill on *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects* in October 1976, which was designed to assist policymakers struggling with the transformation of Australia's defence posture. Ross Babbage wrote about the need for revolutionary change and why Australia must now mobilise its own resources to develop an independent capability to defend itself. Desmond Ball noted that the Services were more interested in equipment questions than in any other element of defence policy. The problem he correctly identified was that Australia lacked a basic policy of sufficient clarity and cohesion to enable the resolution of competing claims. He criticised the then popular idea in Defence of a core force because, he said, it did not know what the core force would expand into in an emergency.

O'Neill wrote about the development of operational doctrine for the ADF. He produced the formative studies of the requisite command-and-control

structure for a joint ADF in 'defence of Australia' contingencies, including a proposal to establish functional command arrangements.

The Department Defence too was busily undertaking contingency studies. But the three military Services and Headquarters Australian Defence Force (which was formed in 1984) struggled to reach agreement with the most senior civilian advisers about what threats they should be prepared to counter, and therefore what force structure priorities should be considered by government. In 1981, for example, as the Senior Assistant Secretary for Strategic Policy, I attended meetings in which only very generic and indicative force structure principles could be agreed upon: no consensus was reached on specific priorities for particular force structure elements.

By late 1984, the Defence Organisation had become quite dysfunctional in some respects. For well over a year the Minister's two most senior advisers, the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) and the Secretary, had exchanged deeply antagonistic correspondence. The Defence Organisation did not even touch on any agreement about force structure priorities for the defence of Australia, which is what the Minister had directed. Instead, it was bogged down in what I can only describe as the theology of defence policy concerning such issues as intelligence warning time, the definition of lower and higher levels of contingency, the priority (or not) to be given to Australia's northern approaches, the core force, and the expansion base.

I was appointed in February 1985 as Ministerial Consultant to the Minister for Defence to resolve these issues. My terms of reference directed me to undertake a review of Australia's defence capabilities: I was asked to examine the content, priorities and rationale of defence forward planning and to advise on which capabilities were appropriate for Australia's present and future defence requirements. I was to make judgements on the appropriate balance between equipment, personnel numbers, facilities and operating costs, between current readiness and long-term investment, and between the relative priorities given to responding to various levels of possible threats. I was to look as far forward as practicable, and it was suggested that an appropriate timeframe could be the next decade. My report was to be formulated in the light of already endorsed strategic guidance.²² It was to be completed within 12 months (and, in fact, the classified version of the report was delivered to the Minister in March 1986, with the public version being released in June 1986).

I soon recognised that this was not some sort of academic exercise: the disagreements between the military and civilian elements of Defence Headquarters were severe. My chief aim of delivering a workable policy solution would be a serious challenge. In the initial drafts, I would have to come down fairly hard in some areas in order to allow for the inevitable bounce back in negotiations with the CDF and the Secretary and their senior military and civilian advisers.

My work was to focus on the development of a clear set of force structure priorities for the self-reliant 'defence of Australia'. For over a year my team circulated drafts to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), which was augmented to include discussions with the Secretary of Defence and his chief advisers. Most months they saw and commented upon drafts written by myself and my team.²³

The main policy differences were that the civilians tended to regard only the lowest of low-level threats as being credible for the immediate and medium term future, whereas the military was more inclined to want to structure now for high-intensity conflict. These differences undermined any possibility of agreement on force structure priorities, the expansion base and stockholding policy. Fortunately, I was able to chart a course that was strategically responsible while also pacifying to some extent and in different ways the principal protagonists. My approach was to give priority to the more credible threat, and to the lower-level threats that could arise with little warning. This clearly recognised that contingencies could escalate on the basis of current and foreseeable regional military capacity, and that we should be able to handle such escalation. At the third level of conflict there were possibilities for more substantial conventional military action—but below the level of invasion. This could only occur if regional countries developed over time the necessary capacities—an outcome that would take many years. The conclusion was that our defence priorities must ensure that the ADF had available sufficient equipment, support and trained personnel to respond to credible military situations. We also needed to take account of the possible demands of more substantial threats. The basic skills necessary for higher-level conflict should be available, to be expanded and further developed within warning time. But any tendency to prepare for unrealistically high levels of threat should be resisted.²⁴

The end result was an historic document which the CDF and the Secretary jointly signed to the Minister broadly agreeing with the direction of my recommendations, but also noting of course that areas of difference remained. As the then CDF, General Sir Phillip Bennett, wrote to me in a personal letter:

The important point is that an agreed course can now be set, and I assure you that it will have my full support in its subsequent implementation following government consideration ... I, and the Chiefs of Staff, agree the general direction of your review and the great bulk of your proposals for the future development of the Australian Defence Force.²⁵

One of the most contentious issues was the size and role of the Australian Army, which was having difficulties adjusting to the post-Vietnam War era. An *Army Development Guide* had been prepared as a basis of force structure development by the Army Office. It argued that, where an enemy had lodged essentially a four brigade divisional group (including supporting troops),

Australia would require a field force comprising some 135 000 troops, and the whole Army would be some 270 000 strong.²⁶ The Army recognised that this was not attainable, so instead it proposed an 'Objective Force-in-Being' with a strength of 94 000 personnel to provide the firm base from which expansion for higher levels of conflict could occur, while concurrently maintaining forces committed to lower-level operations.

I had substantial reservations about this approach as it was at serious variance with the government's endorsed strategic guidance (which my terms of reference instructed me to follow). Instead, I recommended:

The minimum number of regular infantry battalions that we require is six. A lesser number of regular battalions could be faced with an impossible operational task. A similar number of reserve battalions would also be required, to be available for early deployment from a reserve force of at least 10 battalions.²⁷

The interesting question I have is whether the Army is in fact any bigger today?

In passing, let me note that there is a classified version of the *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* or Dibb Review which has not been released publicly. It dealt with specific contingencies in our neighbourhood, including contingencies involving Indonesia, as well as situations to do with the security of PNG. It also canvassed such issues as targets for strike operations, and specific intelligence and surveillance priorities.

The Dibb Review was a *capabilities* review that, within the context of the Australian Government's strategic policies, provided a basis and rationale for the self-reliant structure of the ADF. The Review did not make recommendations on strategic policy, and it did not canvass how the ADF should be *used* overseas. The subsequent 1987 Defence White Paper, *Defence of Australia*, which I helped to draft, set out the government's strategic priorities, including the matter of overseas operations. The White Paper is quite clear on this point. It stipulates that the government's policy of defence self-reliance 'gives priority to the ability to defend ourselves with our own resources' and that this policy 'is pursued within the framework of alliances and agreements'. It concludes by saying:

This paper has stressed that the priority need for the Defence Force is to fulfil the national task of defending the nation. It has also dealt with the need for Australia's defence effort to take account of developments in our region of primary strategic interest, and to be capable of reacting positively to calls for military support elsewhere, should we judge that our interests require it. The Government considers that Australia can deal with both, but to do so we must be alert to priorities.²⁸

So it was that Australia developed pioneering ideas of how to develop a Defence Force without a threat. They were based on two key concepts: (1) the

enduring nature of Australia's strategic geography and its maritime approaches; and (2) a requirement to have a clear military technological advantage in our own region.

This was essentially capabilities-based defence planning long before its time and it carried us through the decade of the 1990s when many other countries were essentially adrift in the post-Cold War world.

The End of the 'Defence of Australia' Doctrine?

Of course, policies had subsequently to be adjusted in response to changing strategic circumstances, yet they did not basically depart from the priority to be given to the defence of Australia. The 1994 Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia*, expanded the idea of defence self-reliance when it argued that we would have to pay more attention to what it called short-warning conflicts because of potential military developments in our region. However, it continued to give priority to making our sea and air approaches an effective barrier to attack, and to ensuring that our forces were familiar with the northern operating environment and that our equipment was optimised for conditions there.

It was prescient of *Defending Australia* to observe that deployments in the Persian Gulf, Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, the South Pacific and elsewhere, as well as our continual defence deployments around the region,

have demonstrated that capabilities developed for the defence of Australia are sufficiently versatile to fulfil a wide range of other tasks. We do not need to make these activities a primary basis for our defence capability planning, because forces developed for the defence of Australia give us a sufficient range of options to meet them.²⁹

Thus, there was essential continuity in Australia's defence planning for a full decade. The new government came into power in 1996, and its 1997 defence policy document stressed that defeating attacks against Australia's territory was our core force structure priority.³⁰ But it also stated that the next highest priority was to provide 'substantial capabilities to defend our regional strategic interests'.³¹ It went on to say that 'priority will be given to the first of these tasks, but decisions will be influenced by the ability of forces to contribute to both tasks'.³² The guidance to the ADF to provide for forces in sufficient number and with the ability to be deployed on both the local and regional level was further hampered by the definition of 'regional interests' being expanded from the immediate neighbourhood to include the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Even so, the Howard Government's *Defence 2000* did not herald dramatic change—except in the key area of defence funding. The fact was that the self-reliance idea had been undermined in the late 1980s and early 1990s by poor economic performance and reduced defence budgets. A prolonged period of

so-called 'zero growth' for the defence budget and the acquisition of important new advanced technologies—particularly for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN)—had meant decreased funding for operating costs and personnel numbers, particularly for the Army.

Defence 2000 represented both strategic continuity and budgetary changes. It was an extremely carefully considered piece of work by the National Security Committee of Cabinet over the best part of a year. It neither walked away from the 'defence of Australia' construct nor returned to the 'forward defence' policies of previous Coalition Governments. It was different in two key areas: first, it involved unprecedented consultation with the Australian community; second, it introduced a new approach to defence planning by providing Defence with a costed defence capability plan for the development of Australia's armed forces over the next decade.

The geographical approach, however, was reassuringly familiar. *Defence 2000* asserted that Australia's most important long-term strategic objective 'is to be able to defend our territory from direct military attack'.³³ This is described as 'the bedrock of our security and the most fundamental responsibility of government'.³⁴ This was then followed by a series of geographical priorities (the so-called concentric circles):

- fostering the security of our immediate neighbourhood;
- promoting stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia;
- supporting strategic stability in the wider Asia-Pacific region; and
- supporting global security.

The statement is made that we have strategic interests and objectives at the global and regional levels. However, it then proceeds to give the highest priority to the interests and objectives closest to Australia because, in general, the closer any crisis is to Australia, the more important it will probably be to our security and the more likely we will be able to assist in confronting and resolving it. This in fact reflected the ADF's actual experience in East Timor the previous year, in 1999.

The force structure priorities in *Defence 2000* are classical 'defence of Australia' orthodoxy. Thus, the priority task for the ADF is the defence of Australia and we must: (1) be *self-reliant*—able to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries; (2), have a *maritime strategy*—be able to control the air and sea approaches to our continent; and (3) have *proficient land forces*—be able to defend Australia and its approaches, and also to contribute substantially to supporting the security of our immediate neighbourhood.

This final task specifically extended the force structure determinants of the ADF to the neighbourhood. It represented an important shift, yet basically at the margin, to the primary drivers of the force structure, and reflected the

deterioration in strategic circumstances in our immediate neighbourhood. The Army was no longer to give priority to providing the basis for its rapid expansion to a size required for major continental-scale operations. The government's aim was to provide available land forces that could respond effectively to any credible armed lodgement on Australian territory *and* provide forces for more likely types of operations in our immediate neighbourhood.

All this was compatible with an essentially bipartisan approach to defence policy principles that had existed for more than 25 years. Having the defence of Australia and our neighbourhood requirements as the primary drivers of the ADF's force structure is eminently sensible. That still leaves niche capabilities for deployments much further afield in support of our alliances and our global interests.

But the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001 threatened to change all that. Some immediately proclaimed the end of the 'defence of Australia' doctrine, which they described as 'discredited'. The previous Defence Minister, Senator Robert Hill, never uttered the words 'defence of Australia' in public, except in a perfunctory manner. He seemed to be much more interested in the foreign policy aspects of the Defence portfolio. For example, it is said that he argued in Cabinet in December 2005 that Australia's most important strategic priority was the Middle East—an argument that he lost.

Certainly, Hill's two *Defence Updates* in 2003 and 2005 were strong on declaratory policy and thin on strategic logic. In my view, Hill was responsible (during his four-year term as Minister for Defence) for seriously undermining the logical strategic priorities of our force structure. The 2003 document was keen to get into product differentiation by showing that the prospect of military attack on Australia had diminished. Yet that was simply raising a 'straw man', because previous Defence White Papers never counted on the likelihood of attack but, rather, on its seriousness were it to occur. Rather lamely, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2003* went on to say that although ADF involvement in coalition operations further afield was somewhat more probable than in the recent past, it was likely to be 'limited to the provision of important niche capabilities'.³⁵

Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2005 emphasised the need for a bigger Army (but only by an additional 1485 regulars) and concluded, correctly, that Defence remains the primary instrument of the Australian Government in building warfighting capacity to respond to possible future threats.³⁶ But it failed spectacularly to explain the strategic reasoning for the acquisition of tanks, the region's largest amphibious ships, the air warfare destroyers (other than to defend the amphibious ships), and the C-17 *Globemaster* III heavy transport aircraft. Substantial parts of *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2005* read more like a foreign policy document, perhaps also

reflecting the leanings of the then Secretary of Defence Ric Smith who was a former senior Foreign Affairs officer.

My colleague, Professor Hugh White, has sought to move beyond the 'defence of Australia' as the central organising principle of defence policy, and focus instead on maximising Australia's military capacity to protect its interests in the stability of the Asia-Pacific region in the face of conventional strategic threats. He believes that the ability to defend the continent will still be important, but the primary focus should be maximising capabilities to protect interests offshore. He claims that, if we choose well, forces designed primarily to defend Australia's wider strategic interests will provide Australia with a robust capacity to defend the continent.³⁷ White recognises that this will require great clarity and discipline in force planning. In my view this will be particularly the case, as he proposes that we should have forces 'maintained at a level able to operate effectively against the forces maintained by major Asian powers, and in sufficient numbers'.³⁸

Hugh White's own force structure proposals concentrate on the need for high-level air and naval forces—primarily submarines and combat aircraft—and he considers that we should not be putting our money into air warfare destroyers and large amphibious ships (although he does envisage a lighter constabulary army of 12 battalions or even more).³⁹ With regard to what forces Australia needs for expeditionary operations, his question is whether there may be some future expeditionary operations in which we would wish to exercise 'substantive strategic weight', or whether they will all be merely diplomatic gestures?⁴⁰ His conclusion is that Australia should aim to build and sustain military capabilities that will give it 'real strategic weight in Asia' as a regional power.⁴¹ But, significantly, he concludes his paper by recognising that Australia's relative strategic potential in Asia is 'in long-term decline'.⁴²

My concern here is that these proposals are too ambitious, even unrealistic, both in terms of the resources that Australia will have available for our national defence effort, and compared with the likely economic and military growth of major Asian powers. Furthermore, the concept is potentially open-ended in its scope and could well lead to equally open-ended force structure proposals. And in my experience of the force structure development process, the ADF could be expected to focus on their expeditionary capability, leaving the defence of Australia a very poor second, irrespective of what the government of the day might claim as its policies. There would be a severe risk that the 'discipline in force planning' required by these policies might be most conspicuous by its absence.

Concluding Thoughts

The question now is whether we have lost the rationale for Australia's force structure? Have we moved away from the defence of Australia and our regional commitments as the primary drivers of the force structure to an expeditionary force primarily designed for operations alongside our US ally in places such as the Middle East? If so, and if we are not careful, this will leave us with something of a hybrid force not optimised for either contingency.

We must not become a one-shot ADF, putting all our eggs into the one basket of protecting two large amphibious ships capable of deploying about 1000 troops each. That must not become the sole operational purpose of the air warfare destroyers or the F-35 *Lightning* II joint strike fighters. In my opinion, leaving the RAN and RAAF with little, if any, independent strategic purpose other than transporting and protecting the Army is a dangerous development and strategically indefensible. In any case, what is the purpose of such an amphibious capability? It seems too modest if it is to mount an opposed landing, and too much if it is only about operating in a permissive environment.

Let me be plain. I have no problem if the primary drivers of the ADF's force structure remain the defence of Australia and credible regional contingencies. And I note here it is reported that Defence Minister Brendan Nelson's classified strategic review, considered by Cabinet in August 2006, affirmed that policy. I also support the idea of a somewhat larger Army with more light infantry. But I think we should not be cutting back on such crucial capabilities for the defence of Australia as mine warfare and anti-submarine warfare, to take two important examples. And it is about time we got on with actually implementing network-centric warfare, as distinct from constantly talking about it.⁴³ I also think we cannot afford to take our eye off maintaining a clear regional advantage in such high-technology capabilities as strike, air combat, and naval warfare (both surface and subsurface).

Our unique strategic geography will simply not disappear. What I have called the 'arc of instability' to our north promises to confront us with even more challenging contingencies than those we have experienced recently in East Timor and Solomon Islands. These are abiding strategic interests for Australia.

However, we need to be careful in the contemporary era about what we expect from the ADF with regard to the threat from terrorism, countering the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and supporting regional states in difficulty. These are all activities in which Defence has a supporting rather than leading role.

Finally, the financially easy days of defence planning may soon be over for Australia. We face the prospect of a rapidly ageing population, which will create greater demands for healthcare in competition with the defence budget.⁴⁴ When

our economy inevitably slows down as an ageing population erodes workforce participation, or our economy simply goes into recession, the pressure will be on to demonstrate that we have a tough-minded and intellectually rigorous force structure plan in place for the ADF. The problem is that this does not seem to be the case at the present time.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Tom Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978, pp. 11–22.
- ² David Horner, 'Security objectives', in (ed.) F. A. Mediansky, *Australian Foreign Policy*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 74–77.
- ³ See Department of Defence, *Australian perspectives on defence: Report of the community consultation team*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, September 2000, p. 2, available at <<http://www.defence.gov.au/consultation2/cctpaper.pdf>>, accessed 8 November 2007; and Ian McAlister, *Attitude matters: Public opinion in Australia towards defence and security*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, 2004, p. 24.
- ⁴ Field Marshal Viscount Kitchener of Khartoum, *Memorandum on the Defence of Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 1910, p. 5.
- ⁵ See, for example, Samuel Albert Rosa, *The Invasion of Australia*, reprinted from 'Truth' by 'The Worker' Trustees, Sydney, 1920, which proposed that Australia needed to be defended by submarines, aircraft and 'properly equipped forts' rather than by battleships and a large army. His conclusion was that Australia 'is one of the easiest countries in the world to defend'. (p. 19).
- ⁶ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, 17 February 1987, *Inquiry into the Management of Australia's Defence and National Security*, Official Hansard Report, Submissions and Incorporated Documents, Volume II, p. 3.
- ⁷ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, pp. 3–4.
- ⁸ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 4.
- ⁹ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Horner, 'Security objectives', in (ed.) F. A. Mediansky, *Australian Foreign Policy*, p. 80.
- ¹¹ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 7.
- ¹² Horner, 'Security objectives', in (ed.) F. A. Mediansky, *Australian Foreign Policy* p. 80.
- ¹³ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 8.
- ¹⁴ Address by the Honourable Malcolm Fraser, Minister for Defence to the City of Sydney Special Branch of the Liberal Party, 10 September 1970.
- ¹⁵ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 10.
- ¹⁶ Department of Defence, *Australian Defence Review*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1972, pp. 11 and 26.
- ¹⁷ Department of Defence, *Australian Defence Review*, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ Department of Defence, *Australian Defence Review*, p. 13.
- ¹⁹ Department of Defence, *Australian Defence*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1976, p. 10.
- ²⁰ Department of Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 17.
- ²¹ See, for example, (ed.) Robert O'Neill, *The defence of Australia—fundamental new aspects*, proceedings of a conference organised by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1977; J. O. Langtry and Desmond Ball, *Controlling Australia's threat environment*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1979; and Ross Babbage, *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1980.
- ²² Department of Defence, *Review of Australia's defence capabilities*, Report to the Minister for Defence by Mr Paul Dibb, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, March 1986, p. xv.

- ²³ My team consisted of Dr Richard Brabin-Smith, Colonel Bill Crews and Mr Martin Brady. Both Brabin-Smith and Brady became Deputy Secretaries of Defence later in their careers, while Crews became Director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation.
- ²⁴ Department of Defence, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, pp. 5–6.
- ²⁵ Personal letter to Paul Dibb from General Sir Phillip Bennett, Chief of the Defence Force, dated 14 April 1986.
- ²⁶ Ross Babbage also argued that an Army 'of at least 150 000 and possibly 250 000 might well be required' to meet an intensive campaign of small scale raids on a continuing basis 'throughout large parts of the continent and against offshore territories and coastal shipping'. (Babbage, *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, p. 87).
- ²⁷ Department of Defence, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 10.
- ²⁸ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987, p. 110.
- ²⁹ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p. 15.
- ³⁰ Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1997, p. 29, available at <<http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/sr97/SR97.pdf>>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- ³¹ Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, p. 36.
- ³² Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, p. 36.
- ³³ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2000, available at <<http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/WPAPER.PDF>>, accessed 8 November 2007, p. 30.
- ³⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, p. 29.
- ³⁵ Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2003*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. 24, available at <<http://www.defence.gov.au/ans2003/>>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- ³⁶ Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 26, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/update2005/defence_update_2005.pdf>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- ³⁷ Hugh White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, Lowy Institute paper, no. 16, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 2006, p. ix, available at <<http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=521>>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- ³⁸ White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, p. 51.
- ³⁹ White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, pp. x, 30 and 52.
- ⁴⁰ White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, p. 55.
- ⁴¹ White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, p. 56.
- ⁴² White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, p. 57.
- ⁴³ Defence does not envisage what it calls a 'Seamless NCW Force' until 2020. See Department of Defence, *NCW Roadmap*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/capability/ncwi/docs/2007NCW_Roadmap.pdf2007>, accessed 8 November 2007.
- ⁴⁴ See the article by Ken Henry, Secretary to the Treasury, entitled 'Australia's Defence to 2045: The Macro-economic Outlook', *Defender* (Journal of the Australian Defence Association), vol. XXII, no. 3, Spring 2005, pp. 19–24.