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# Strategic Interests in Australian Defence Policy: Some Historical and Methodological Reflections

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The first, and often the hardest, step in any defence policy is to define strategic objectives—what we want our armed forces to be able to do. This is especially hard for a country like Australia, because most of the circumstances in which we would rely on the Australian Defence Force most heavily are only credible if the international order in Asia were to have changed significantly. How can we decide what we would want our armed forces to do in a region very different from the one we know today? This problem has become more acute since the early 1990s, because the end of the Cold War and the rise of China have increased the probability of major systemic change in Asia. This essay explores an approach to identifying long-term strategic objectives in these circumstances. The approach it is based on a specific conception of *strategic interests*, defined as those factors in the international order that significantly affect the likelihood or seriousness of armed attack on Australia. This essay also describes how this approach was developed in the 1990s and applied in the 2000 White Paper, and considers its applicability in future defence policy.

## Setting Strategic Objectives

Any policy process must start with a clear statement of objectives, and the clearer the objectives, the better the policy is likely to be. Defence policy is no different. Decisions about the capabilities required in our armed forces have to start from a clear statement of *strategic objectives*. In this essay (subject to an elaboration that will be introduced later) I will use this phrase to mean, specifically, the policy goals that we want to be able to achieve through the use of our armed forces. Obviously, the more clearly and explicitly we can define strategic objectives, the easier it will be to build forces that can achieve them, and achieve them cost-effectively. But it is often very hard to give plain and direct answers to the question ‘what do we want our armed forces to be able to do?’ Finding those answers and thereby defining strategic objectives therefore presents not only the first, but often also the greatest, challenge to defence policy.

The problem is particularly difficult for Australia, because our strategic situation is a little peculiar. Our peculiarity has to do with the risk we face of conventional military attack. Notwithstanding the attention being given to other roles for armed force, concern about the risk of conventional military attack remains the primary determinant of defence policy, because conventional conflict remains the primary purpose for which armed forces like Australia’s are organized, trained and equipped. But our defence

planners have always found Australia's exposure to conventional military threat hard to classify. We do not face a clear and present danger of conventional military attack, but nor are we inevitably and immutably secure. Australia is not one of those countries that face (or believe they face) obvious and immediate threats which directly determine their strategic objectives – countries like Israel, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Singapore, and of course members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Given the present global and regional order, including the distribution of military capability and the probable pattern of national intentions and motives, no country is at all likely to project substantial armed force against us.

But neither is Australia among those countries like Canada, New Zealand, and the West Europeans, whose security from attack appears to have very deep roots in the international order, and who believe that it would require radical and highly improbable changes in world affairs for the foundations of this security to crack. For them, strategic objectives no longer relate to the security of their territory from military attack, but to wider security, diplomatic, political or humanitarian purposes. Their policies often pay lip-service to defence against conventional attack, because of the deep (and correct) instinct among voters and decision-makers that this is what armed forces are for. But in the absence of credible scenarios in which such a threat could emerge, the formulation of coherent strategic objectives becomes difficult. Fortunately that does not matter much: provided they are right that the risk of military attack is so low, the consequences of poor defence policy are unlikely to be severe.

Australia's security from conventional attack is not as well-founded as Canada's or Belgium's. It depends on a large number of contingent features of the current regional order which could quite credibly change in coming years in ways that would sharply increase the likelihood of direct threat against us. This is what gives Australian defence policy its distinctive flavour. We have a strategic environment which, to our great good fortune, has been remarkably benign for the past few decades. As long as the international order in Asia remains much as it has for the past thirty or forty years, we will remain highly secure from armed attack. But relatively challenging minor threats could emerge with little change in the wider regional order, and our security could be much more seriously threatened by larger changes which are not in themselves very unlikely. That is why, unlike Canada and New Zealand, and despite recent decades of security, we have always maintained a strong focus on the defence of our territory. It has shaped Australia's approach to defence planning, producing two divergent strands. One strand has addressed the modest threats that could still emerge with little change to Australia's strategic environment, such as the low level contingencies which absorbed so much attention in the 1980s. The other has addressed the risk that the wider international order that underpinned that

benign strategic environment might change, bringing new and more demanding challenges.

This second strand of policy has received less overt attention than the first, but for decades one of the core underlying issues in Australian defence debates has been how seriously to take the risk of major systemic change in our strategic environment.<sup>1</sup> This was evident even in the 1980s. When one looks at the key force-structure choices of that time, such as the F-18s and Collins submarines, it is clear that defence planners had a lot more on their minds than low-level contingencies involving Indonesia. Those capabilities related to threats of a scale that could only have emerged if the international order had changed significantly. But the issue became more marked after the end of the Cold War, because the potential for major systemic change in Asia seemed to grow with the collapse of the strategic framework imposed by the Cold War, and with the rise of China. Today the most important differences over the future direction of Australian defence policy tend to derive from different views of the likelihood and consequences of major systemic change in Asia over coming decades. Some argue there is little or no risk that the international order will change in ways that would increase the threat of conventional military attack on Australia. For them the problem of setting strategic objectives involves deciding which of the various security challenges we face *within* the current international order—global warming, terrorism, state failure, WMD proliferation and others—most deserve or require the application of armed force. But for those who believe there is a significant risk that systemic change in Asia might increase conventional military threats, the problem of how armed forces should best be developed to address that risk is the key question of defence policy. For them, the key question is what we might want Australia's armed forces to be able to do against threats which are different from, and greater than, those that seem currently credible. This was an important subject of debate within some parts of the Department of Defence in the 1990s, and was the focus of much of the thinking behind the 2000 Defence White Paper. The challenge essentially was to identify the strategic objectives we might want the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to be able to achieve if the future brings something rather different from the world, and especially the Asia-Pacific region, we know today.

One quite credible school of thought argues that the problem is insuperable. They say that attempts by successive White Papers to predict the future have always failed and always will, and that the best we can do therefore is to build 'flexible' forces that will give us some useful options whatever happens.

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<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of warning time, upon which so much emphasis was placed in the 1970s and 1980s, is best seen as being in large measure a response to this problem, as becomes clear when one looks for example at the treatment of the concept in the Dibb Review: Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1986), p. 32.

I have recently argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that this approach to defence policy has two flaws. First, the flexible force is unlikely to be able to deal effectively with many of the most serious threats we may face, so we avoid the problem of trying to predict the future only at the price of being unable to prepare for it. Second, it underestimates our ability to find, in the shifting sands of future uncertainty, some firm ground on which to base our long-term plans. This essay aims to explore this second issue. It argues that, properly conceived and developed, the concept of *strategic interest* can provide a reliable and durable foundation for long-term defence planning by allowing us to identify long-term strategic objectives which will remain valid even if systemic change in the international order brings new, different and greater threats.

### **Strategic Interests and Strategic Objectives**

What do I mean here by a *strategic* interest? The phrase is often used rather loosely, but here it needs to be more narrowly defined. Let's start with a broad conception of *national* interest, which can cover everything about the world that affects Australia's well-being. In this sense our national interests cover everything from the workings of the global economic order and access to markets for our exports, to a just and sustainable solution to the Darfur problem and the protection of the Antarctic wilderness. Within this broad concept of national interests also we can identify a narrower category of *security interests*. How large this category is depends on how widely we define 'security'. Today security is properly conceived quite broadly, covering many kinds of threat including economic, environmental, criminal and natural hazards. Many of these however have little or nothing to do with armed force, so to get at the interests that should drive defence policy we need to define a still narrower category: a subset of security interests that we can properly call *strategic interests*. These are the interests which relate to the risk of conventional military threats against Australia, and which do so sufficiently directly that we might want to use armed force to protect them.<sup>3</sup> Strategic interests are therefore those elements of the international order that affect, directly or indirectly, the likelihood or seriousness of an attack against us. They reflect the ways that our vulnerability to attack might be increased or decreased by changes to the international system, the distribution of power and influence, and the balances of military capabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh White, *The New Defence White Paper: Why We Need It and What it Needs to Do*, Lowy Institute Perspective (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, April 2008), pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> A point of clarification. The narrow conception of strategic interest proposed here does not imply that the only purposes for which we might want to use force relate to the risk of conventional attack. Obviously we might want to use armed force to protect wider security interests or national interests, if we think such force might be effective and are willing to pay the price. My constrained definition of 'strategic interest' implies only that, as we have seen, and notwithstanding the range of other tasks, the core purpose of armed force remains responding to the risk of military attack. Working out what kind of forces we need for that purpose thus remains the key task of defence planning, and deciding what we would want our armed forces to be able to do to manage the risk of direct attack thus remains the central problem in defence planning.

This conception of strategic interests provides a robust foundation for identifying strategic objectives. In general we can say that our strategic objectives will be to protect our strategic interests: our purpose will be to shape the world in ways that minimise the likelihood or seriousness of military threats. However, the relationship between strategic interests and objectives is a little more complex than this. First, we have to take account of the range of different policy instruments available. Clearly there are many things we can do to protect our strategic interests other than to use armed force. Diplomacy, aid, and many other instruments will also play a part, and often the principal part, in preventing developments which would make us more liable to attack. Force, as always should be a last resort. We therefore need to distinguish between broader and narrower conceptions of strategic objective. *National* strategic objectives are those that we bring all the instruments of policy to bear on. *Military* strategic objectives are those we want to be able to achieve substantially or primarily through the use of our armed forces if necessary. For defence planners, the narrower concept of military strategic objective is the one we need: it covers those things we might want to do with armed force to protect our strategic interests. For convenience I will here use strategic objective to refer to this narrower concept.

Second, there is the question of practicality. Any conception of policy objectives must pass a test of realistic achievability, and that is especially true in defence policy. There will often be a gap between the factors which affect our security from attack and the measures we can take to address them. We have strategic interests which we cannot realistically expect to be able to protect with armed force, because we lack the power to do so. Hence there will always be strategic interests which we cannot translate into strategic objectives. Indeed it is the perennial fate of small and medium powers that their security from attack depends on factors in the international system which they have no power to influence, either by military or by other means. For them, good policy aims to maximise their influence, but realism requires recognition of its limits. That means there is a difference between identifying a strategic interest and adopting the corresponding strategic objective as a basis for defence planning. This is true even for great powers; all defence planning is a matter of finding the equilibrium between our concerns about risks and our willingness or ability to pay what is required to address them.

### **Beyond the Great Debate**

Strategic interests have not received much attention in the development of Australian defence policy. The reason for this can be found, I think, in the somewhat constrained binary debate between 'continental' and 'expeditionary' schools which under different labels has framed Australian defence debates for so long. Both approaches have discouraged detailed reflection on Australia's strategic interests, because they have both held

highly reductionist views of what our strategic interests might be. The core tenet of the expeditionary school has been a belief that Australia's primary, or indeed only, strategic interest is to maintain a strong alliance with a pre-eminent global power. This has been seen as a necessary and sufficient condition for Australian security. The expeditionary school has consequently seen the sole purposes of Australia's armed forces – our sole strategic objective, in other words - as supporting our allies and strengthening our alliances with them. This idea has had a decisive influence on Australian defence policy for much of our history, and has never completely disappeared.

The 'continental' school of defence policy, which emerged as the dominant strand of Australian policy thinking after Vietnam, took a very different but equally reductionist view of Australian strategic interests. The heart of the Defence of Australia (DoA) strategies embodied in the 1976 and 1987 White Papers was the idea the ADF should be developed to protect a single strategic interest: the defence of the continent itself from direct attack. There is ample scope for debate about whether in the circumstances of the time this was the best way to respond to the strategic dynamics of the post-Vietnam era: my own view is that it had a lot of merit but also real limitations.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt however that one of the prime attractions of the narrow DoA conception that drove defence policy in the 1970s and 1980s was the way it provided a clear, simple and durable basis for disciplined force planning by identifying the defence of the continent from direct attack as our single unambiguous strategic interest. One of the reasons why DoA's champions have clung to it so tenaciously ever since has been their conviction that any broader conception of Australia's strategic interests would necessarily forgo the simplicity and clarity, and relax and discipline, that this single strategic interest provided.

But strategic trends take no account of the preferences of policymakers. Whatever its attractions in the 1970s and 1980s, by the 1990s the idea that Australia's defence policy could remain focused solely on the defence of the continent was under serious pressure. Regular deployments to the Middle East and Africa, increasing stabilisation commitments in Australia's immediate neighbourhood, and the changing strategic dynamics of the Asia-Pacific all undermined the convenient assumption that forces designed to defend the continent would always provide what was needed to meet Australia's strategic objectives further afield.<sup>5</sup> Quite early in the 1990s it became apparent that we needed to broaden the basis of our defence policy. The problem was how to do it.

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<sup>4</sup> See Hugh White, 'Four Decades of the Defence of Australia: Reflections on Australian Defence Policy over the Past 40 Years', in Ron Huisken and Meredith Thatcher (eds.), *History as Policy: Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy* (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2007), pp. 163-187.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

That remains one of the key challenges in Australian defence policy today. It is easy to agree that Australia's defence policy should encompass more than the direct defence of the continent. The harder part is to say, precisely and clearly, what more it should do. Our aim should be to expand the scope of defence policy without losing the clarity and rigour that DoA once provided. To do that we need to go beyond a simple assertion that Australia has wider interests that need to be protected, and identify what those interests are, explain how our armed forces can help defend them, and identify the best mix of forces to do so. The essential first step, obviously, is to build a conception of Australia's strategic interests which goes beyond the over-simplified approaches of both the continental and the expeditionary poles of Australia's traditional defence debate. This is not easy. DoA maintained its grip on defence policy for so long because it is so hard to agree on a simple, durable and robust, but still concrete and rigorous account of Australia's wider strategic interests that might provide the foundation for a new, wider approach to defence planning.

### **Help From Pitt and Palmerston**

Where then should we start looking for a more expansive but still rigorous understanding of Australia's strategic interests? During the early 1990s some of us working in Defence began exploring this problem of defining Australia's wider strategic interests in the post-Cold War world.<sup>6</sup> Our attention was caught by Lord Palmerston's famous line about 'Britain having no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, only permanent interests.' We started to look at how Britain defined these permanent interests, and what we might learn from them. For centuries British policy was guided by a view of its strategic interests which had hardly changed from the time of Elizabeth I until after World War II, articulated and implemented by men like Burleigh, Marlborough, Walpole, Pitt, Wellington, Palmerston and Churchill. Their ideas were well-understood by Australia's first generation of strategic policymakers—Alfred Deakin and his contemporaries—who had drawn on these British strategic concepts as they started to think about Australia's security in the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> To them, and to us, the British experience seemed worth examining, not because of historical or sentimental connections with the UK, but because of certain geostrategic similarities. Like Australia, Britain is an island lying offshore a continent of major powers. Despite major and important differences, this seemed a reasonable place to start. And the British, having avoided invasion for a

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<sup>6</sup> Some insight into the earlier thinking about these issues in post-Cold War Australian Defence Policy will be found in my forthcoming SDSC Working Paper provisionally entitled 'Australian Defence Policy and the End of the Cold War: Three Early Reflections from 1993'.

<sup>7</sup> There are many examples. See for instance Edmund Barton quoted in Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: the Initiation of Australia* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001), p. 155. John McEwan said very much the same thing in November 1941: W.J. Hudson and H.J.W. Stokes (eds.), *Documents in Australian Foreign Policy 1937-1949*, Volume V, July 1941-June 1942 (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs, 1982), p. 180.

nearly a thousand years, seemed to be getting something right. They had developed a strong, coherent sense of their key strategic interests which had endured with little change for centuries, providing a durable guide to generations of policymakers. That was the kind of thing we were after.

The enduring formulation of Britain's 'permanent' strategic interests is deceptively simple. It has three elements. First, Britain has always been at pains to ensure that her maritime forces could dominate the seas around Britain. Second, it has tried to ensure that no hostile power had access to ports from which her command of those sea approaches could be challenged, and attacks on Britain itself could be launched – especially the channel ports of Northern France and the Low Countries. Third, it did its best to ensure that no single major power dominated the continent of Europe.<sup>8</sup> These three interests form an obvious concentric hierarchy in the geographical sense—from Britain's immediate maritime approaches, moving to the closer shores of Europe, and then on to the continent as a whole. But they also form a causal or policy hierarchy: a balance of power on the Continent makes it easier to deny the Low Country ports to an enemy, and denying the channel ports makes it easier to dominate the Channel. And they also form a clear hierarchy of priority: while Britain has consistently tried to maintain a continental balance of power, it has placed higher priority on the security of the Channel ports, and highest of all on the fleet that guards the English Channel.

The translation of these strategic interests into strategic objectives for British policy was pretty straightforward. First, maintain naval [and later, air] forces sufficient to deny the English Channel and other sea approaches to hostile forces. Second, support small neighbours on the European coast of the Channel against predatory major European powers. Third, align with weaker powers to preserve a balance of power among Europe's major states and ensure that none became dominant. These precepts have determined British strategic policy for centuries. They have left scope for deep differences over how best they could be achieved, especially between those who favoured a maritime strategy—traditionally the Tory view—and Whigs who believed that Britain had to be able to deploy major forces to fight on the continent. But those debates about means have been framed within deep agreement about ultimate aims.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As one might expect, the classical account of Britain's strategic interests have probably never been better or more pithily expressed than by Winston Churchill. In his *The Second World War* he quotes himself saying: "For four hundred years the foreign policy of England has been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive most dominating power on the Continent, and particularly to prevent the Low Countries falling into the hands of such a power." Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell and Co, 1948), p. 162

<sup>9</sup> Some American strategists have also been attracted by the British model of 'permanent interests'. See for example George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 10.

## **The Basic Idea**

How might we apply the principles of Pitt and Palmerston to Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The methodological key to the British approach is to identify the specific factors which over the long term do most to influence the likelihood and seriousness of an armed attack. So we need to ask what are the factors which most influence the risks and scale of long-term threat to Australia? At present the risk of attack on Australia seems very low. Our defence policy needs to ask: What makes that so, and hence what would need to change for the threat of attack on Australia to rise significantly? These factors, if we can identify them, should provide the key to Australia's enduring strategic interests. Once the question is posed in these terms, it is not very hard to sketch an answer. Obviously lots of things contribute to Australia's present security, including the quality of our relations with other countries. But ultimately Australia today feels relatively secure from attack because of the distribution of military power around us. First, none of our close neighbours has the military capability to project forces across Australia's air and sea approaches in the face of our current armed forces. Second, no major power that could challenge our control of our approaches has access to bases in our immediate neighbourhood from which they could project power against us. Third, no major power in our wider region, or beyond, has the capacity to project forces into our region without meeting effective resistance from other major powers. As long as these things remain true, Australia will remain secure from direct attack. Conversely, if any of these factors changed, we would feel much less secure. We have here, then, a first sketch of Australia's enduring strategic interests.

Can it be that easy? These features of our international situation are so fundamental to our security, and so familiar to us, that we tend to take them for granted. Consequently it can take some effort of imagination to recognise how they might be different. But none of these factors is immutable, especially over the longer term. Indonesia in future could build air and naval forces more capable than ours. In time, a major Asian power like China could get access to military bases in Papua New Guinea (PNG). And in time Asia could become dominated by a single hegemonic power—not the United States, but China, India or Japan—with the capacity to project power towards Australia without meeting major opposition. None of these outcomes is by any means a certainty. Indeed the reason we all think that a direct attack on Australia is very unlikely is that none of the key factors that underpin our security from direct attack seems very likely to change. But our confidence in all these factors is primarily a reflection in our expectation that the international system in Asia today will continue to function for the next few decades much as it has for the last few decades. Perhaps it will, but not much would need to change for any of the situations mentioned above to become much less improbable, and it is relatively easy to see how such a future could emerge from the trends we see around us today. Finding ways

to help prevent such things happening is the basic task of Australian strategic policy.

To some, perhaps, it may seem improbable that a conception of strategic interests dating back 500 years can be relevant to Australian defence policy over coming decades. In particular, it might appear that technology has made geography much less important now than it was in the age of Elizabeth I. In fact that is true to a much lesser extent than one might imagine. The application of physical force remains an inherently special business: forces have to be deployed and sustained in space, and distance remains, as it was for Phillip of Spain, a decisive factor in the ability to launch and sustain military operations. So far only ballistic missiles provide a means to deliver force free of constraints of distance, but they do so only at an immense cost, and at a cost that increases very rapidly with range. Their use at intercontinental ranges remains militarily ineffective unless they are carrying nuclear warheads, or have exceptionally valuable targets. They do not change the basic strategic calculus. Cyber warfare perhaps offers a more significant challenge to the spatial nature of conflict: how seriously we take cyber warfare in defence planning is a subject for another time, but suffice to say I think its impact has been exaggerated.

### Theory Into Practice

The ideas that we adapted from Pitt and Palmerston underlay the development of the short account of Australia's wider strategic interests provided in the 1997 Strategic Policy Review,<sup>10</sup> and the revised, extended and more detailed description given in Chapter Four of the 2000 White Paper.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of that chapter was specifically to lay the foundation for a broadly-based strategic policy by giving a more rigorous account than had previously been attempted of Australia's wider strategic interests. It built upon our initial ideas described above to identify five distinct strategic interests: the defence of the direct approaches to the continent, the stability of the immediate neighbourhood, security in Southeast Asia, the strategic balance in the wider Asia-Pacific, and support for global security. These interests were presented as a concentric hierarchy whose geographic ordering reflected—like the British model—both their relative priority, and a causal or practical hierarchy as well. The allocation of priority according to proximity is qualified but quite explicit. *Defence 2000* explained:

We have given highest priority to those interests closest to Australia. In some circumstances a major crisis far from Australia may be more important to our future security than a minor problem close at hand. But in general, the closer a crisis is to Australia, the more important it would probably be to

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<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia's Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2000), Chapter 4.

our security, and the more likely we would be to be able to do something about it.<sup>12</sup>

It might have added that the closer a problem is to Australia the less likely anyone else would be prepared to take the lead in responding to it, and the more directly it might affect the security of the continent itself. Of course this 'concentric principle' could never be more than a rough rule of thumb, but as a broad guide to setting priorities it seemed simple, effective, enduring and intuitively compelling. It was also absolutely necessary: some basis for assigning priorities to the different interests was essential if they were to provide a basis for capabilities decisions.

Moreover, to provide a successful foundation for defence decisions the White Paper's account of Australia's strategic interests had to be specific and explicit enough to allow the derivation of clear strategic objectives, operational options and ultimately capability priorities. This required us to avoid evasions and circumlocutions as much as possible. In a public document some ellipsis is inevitable, but we strove at least to provide the clearest statements we could of precisely what Australia's security required. We took some deliberate risks in the process, because it seemed so important to say what we meant as clearly as possible. The following paragraphs, however, may be useful in explaining the thinking that underlay the statements of strategic interests in *Defence 2000* and the operational and force structure implications that were drawn from them.

The highest-priority strategic interest in *Defence 2000* was to sustain our ability to defend the continent from direct attack. It embedded the traditional priority for the Defence of Australia at the heart of the new more expansive conception of Australia's strategic interests. Operationally it incorporated the judgement that most effective way to do this was by deny our air and sea approaches to hostile forces,<sup>13</sup> and that denial operations should begin

as far from our shores as possible, including in their homes bases, forward operating bases and in transit. We would aim to seize the initiative and dictate the pace, location and intensity of operations.<sup>14</sup>

What are the specific implications of these judgements for defence policy? Australia has traditionally enjoyed an unchallenged margin of superiority in air and naval capabilities in our region, but twenty or thirty years from now that might not be so. If Indonesia's economy grew strongly over coming decades it could afford forces which might challenge Australia's unless we work hard to stay ahead. Alternatively, a major change in regional order could see the highly-capable forces of one or more of Asia's major powers operating in the approaches to Australia. Such changes are not in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Para 4.5, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Para 4.7, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Para 6.9, p. 48.

themselves very unlikely, especially if we look ahead twenty-five years. Australia's military superiority over the kinds of forces we might meet in our own direct approaches is therefore not to be taken for granted, and preserving that superiority is our prime strategic interest.

The second strategic interest identified in *Defence 2000* was the stability of our immediate neighbourhood, and specifically the denial of bases close to Australia to potentially hostile major powers. A key factor in Australia's security has always been that, thanks to our remote location, no country with bases close to Australia has been capable of challenging our control of the continent's air and sea approaches. Conversely, any attempt to base forces close to Australia cannot help but appear threatening. This is not a new idea. Australia started thinking strategically about its own security in the late nineteenth century when colonial leaders became concerned that French and German colonies in Australia's immediate region might provide bases for an attack on Australia. In the language of the 2000 White Paper, people like Deakin wanted to 'prevent the positioning in neighbouring states of foreign forces that might be used to attack Australia'.<sup>15</sup> Their fears were realised in 1942.

In 2000 we judged that any change in the international order that saw potentially hostile forces operating from bases in our immediate neighbourhood would significantly increase the risk of substantial, sustained direct attack by conventional armed forces on Australia. Australia is too far from the home bases of any major power for them to be able to sustain operations in our approaches without access to bases close to hand. With such bases, our maritime defences could be more easily overcome, and our ability to deny the continent's approaches to an adversary eroded. Denying an adversary such bases is therefore a key strategic interest, second only to the defence of Australia itself.

Before turning to the implications of this interest for defence policy, it is first perhaps worth stressing that by identifying something as a strategic interest one is making no judgments about likelihood of some development or other; one is only saying that if it occurred it would have important implications for our security from armed attack. There remains of course a separate question about the resources, financial and otherwise, that one might expend in protecting it: that would depend on judgements of probability, and of seriousness were it to be threatened. In this present example, the likelihood of a potentially hostile power seeking bases in our neighbourhood is indeed remote. But our focus here is on the possibility and implications of systemic change. If, in time, active strategic competition developed between the United States and China, for example, the risk of major power intrusions into our neighbourhood would grow. How unlikely is that over the next thirty years?

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Para 4.8, p. 31.

Australia's strategic interest in the quarantine of our immediate neighbourhood has clear implications for our force structure and broader strategic policy. First, it suggests that Australia needs military options to defend our small island neighbours from direct attack. Moreover because their security is so important to Australia's own, we might put a high priority on being able to defend them from a major adversary without the help of our allies. Operationally this would best be done by denial of their air and sea approaches. That suggests that we need forces, and access to bases, that can extend Australia's ability to control its own air and sea approaches to those of its small island neighbours. Diplomatically it underpins the importance of Australia's security undertakings to PNG under the Joint Declaration of Principles, and the unilateral undertakings to support other island neighbours that were set out in *Defence 2000*.<sup>16</sup> And it provides a robust strategic underpinning to the broader security and humanitarian motives for Australia to play a strong role in supporting internal stability and effective government among these weak and vulnerable states.<sup>17</sup> The risk of internal instability increases the vulnerability of our neighbours to external pressure and intrusion, and we have a wider concern to promote strong and effective government among our neighbours which aligns with, but goes beyond, our strictly strategic interests. This in turn may have major implications for Australia's force needs.

The third ring in the concentric hierarchy of interests set out in *Defence 2000* covered maritime Southeast Asia. Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei together form the region 'from or through' which (as Paul Dibb famously wrote<sup>18</sup>) any major military conventional threat to Australia would most likely come. Australia's security in recent decades has been greatly strengthened by the stability of Southeast Asia. We have a strong interest in that being preserved. As *Defence 2000* said:

We would be concerned about any major external threat to the territorial integrity of the nations in our nearer region, especially in maritime Southeast Asia, whether that threat came from outside or inside the region.<sup>19</sup>

What did this mean? First, we omitted reference to the internal stability of these states, not because it was unimportant, but because, from a defence policy perspective, there seemed simply no realistic possibility that Australia's military forces could do anything significant to help. The focus of Australian strategic policy in Southeast Asia was therefore 'major external

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Para 6.11, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in recent years this view of Australia's enduring strategic interests has been proposed as a key reason for deeper Australian engagement with small and vulnerable neighbours in two Australian Strategic Policy Institute reports. See: Elsin Wainwright, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2003); Elsin Wainwright, *New Neighbour, New Challenge: Australia and the Security of East Timor* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Para 4.9, p. 31.

threats' from either inside or outside the region. We reasoned first that Australia's security would be seriously eroded if any of the larger countries of maritime Southeast Asia—most obviously Indonesia—tried to absorb or dominate smaller and weaker neighbours. That means Australia has a strong and enduring interest in ensuring that no major act of military aggression by Indonesia—or any country in maritime Southeast Asia—against any of its neighbours would be allowed to succeed. Second, we believed that Australia had a key interest in preventing the strategic intrusion of any of Asia's great powers into Maritime Southeast Asia as that would make it easier for them to project military power towards Australia. Again, this idea has a long history: preventing Chinese, and before that Japanese, strategic intrusion into this region has been an enduring Australian strategic priority for decades.

As a general principle, then, Australia has an enduring strategic interest in helping to prevent military aggression against our maritime Southeast Asian neighbours either from inside or outside the region. The diplomatic implications are clear: this interest underlies and justifies Australia's continued commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements, under which we are committed to help defend Malaysia and Singapore against external attack. It also provides the strategic rationale for a formal security agreement with Indonesia, problematic thought that concept has proved. What of the implications for capabilities? We judged that Australia would not intervene in a conflict in Southeast Asia without at least the support of the country being attacked, but that we might want options to support a regional coalition to resist aggression in which the United States was not involved. Australia might therefore need to lead such a regional coalition. We would want to be able to make a substantial contribution to a coalition force—and by substantial we mean one that was large enough to make a real operational difference to the outcome. Our forces would need to be able to undertake major independent operations within a coalition campaign, operating from bases in the region provided by our regional coalition partners.

Perhaps the most obvious foundation of Australia's security in recent decades has been the maintenance of a stable strategic balance between Asia's major powers, based on the continued primacy of the United States in the Western Pacific. It would be tempting to say that our principle interest in the wider security of Asia is simply to sustain US strategic engagement as the dominant maritime power, but in drafting *Defence 2000* we thought this would confuse ends with means. Australia's primary interest is in the stable strategic balance itself. The US presence in Asia is the primary means through which that interest is sustained.<sup>20</sup> In 2000 it seemed there were two

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<sup>20</sup>This way of thinking about the US alliance and its relationship to Australia's interests in the wider Asian strategic balance was foreshadowed by Hedley Bull in 1972, when he wrote that Australia's policy might be "firmly based on the proposition that the country's security rested

ways that our interest in a stable strategic balance in Asia might be upset. One is the emergence of a single hegemonic power in Asia which, if not balanced and constrained by other powers, might be free to use or threaten force against smaller countries like Australia. The other is the emergence of an active and sustained strategically-adversarial relationship between two or more of Asia's major powers.<sup>21</sup> For example, acute strategic competition between China and Japan would most probably include competition for bases and allies in maritime Southeast Asia, raising significantly the risk of major power penetration into our nearer region or even our immediate neighbourhood.

What can Australia do to protect our interest in preventing any of these bad outcomes? As long as America plays a key strategic role in Asia, the best way to support our interests in the Asian power balance will be to support them. This provides the core rationale for our commitments to the United States under ANZUS. The alliance helps to underpin the United States stabilising role in Asia, but it also creates an imperative to encourage the United States, Japan and China to preserve their stable strategic relationships of recent decades in the face of rapidly changing power relativities. Our interest in Asian stability therefore carries big implications for Australia's strategic diplomacy. There are also implications for forces structure. Disastrous as a US-China conflict would be, Australia clearly needs options to support the United States militarily if such a conflict breaks out. In 2000 we judged that this is the only circumstance in which Australia would become engaged in an Asian major-power conflict beyond maritime Southeast Asia. Australia's military effort would be limited to a contribution to a larger coalition led by the United States. However to do justice to the scale of Australian interests that would be engaged, our commitment would need to be significant—much larger, for example, than we have sent to the Gulf in successive coalition operations. Australia's strategic objectives in a Northeast Asian conflict threatening Asia's major-power balance would go beyond the mere demonstration of support for our ally. We would have a critical interest in how the conflict was conducted and concluded, because this would profoundly affect Australia's future strategic environment. Our strategic objective would therefore be to achieve real influence over the way the United States conducted and concluded the conflict, and we would therefore want to have operational options available to contribute forces that would be sufficiently significant to the US effort to give us that level of influence—much as the UK has tried to do in the Gulf in recent years. That

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primarily not on the alliance with the United States but on equilibrium among the great powers in Asia and the Pacific". Hedley Bull, 'Australia and the Great Powers in Asia', in Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (eds.), *Australia in World Affairs 1966-1970* (Melbourne: Cheshire/AIIA, 1974), p. 349.

<sup>21</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Para 4.10

suggests we need to build forces that are capable of making that kind of contribution—a demanding task.

The fifth level of the hierarchy of strategic interests developed in the 2000 White Paper was global. Australia has many security and humanitarian interests at the global level, some of which have been pursued through the deployment of armed forces. But in narrowly strategic terms, Australia's security from direct attack is shaped by global developments because our Asian strategic environment and our own bilateral alliances are shaped by them. The capacity of our allies to help Australia has depended on their ability to manage competing strategic pressures elsewhere, and our allies' willingness to support us has depended on Australia being seen as supporting them in their fights elsewhere. We have often also recognised an interest at the global level in supporting global norms and institutions that offer a prospect of reducing the risk to Australia from armed conflict. At those times when the UN has seemed to offer such prospects, we have seen a genuine strategic interest in supporting it.

What kinds of military operations does Australia need to undertake to serve these global strategic interests and objectives? In the two world wars Australia deployed forces to global theatres which had the capacity to make a genuine strategic impact. But since 1945—and arguably since 1942—Australia has preserved its strategic interests with small, primarily symbolic deployments. Australia needs the capacity to contribute small contingents to US-led coalitions and UN-sponsored operations around the world. In the 2000 White Paper we said:

Beyond the Asia-Pacific region, we would normally consider only a relatively modest contribution to any wider UN or US-led coalition...<sup>22</sup>

## Next Steps

We did not presume in 2000 that our formulation of Australia's enduring strategic interests would prove to be the last word on the subject. We had no doubt that a lot more work would be needed to build a stable and durable understanding of the factors that determine Australia's security to provide the basis for Australian defence planning. We did however believe that this 'interests-driven' approach to defence policy provided a better basis for decisions about long-term capability choices than any of others that had been proposed. The challenge for students and practitioners of defence policy alike is to either contribute to refining our understanding of Australia's

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Para 6.20, p. 31.

enduring strategic interests,<sup>23</sup> or to propose a better way to answer the question: 'what do we want our armed forces to be able to do?'

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<sup>23</sup> Some valuable recent contributions on this topic have been made by Stephan Frühling, 'A New Defence White Paper: Moving on from the Five Circles?', *Security Challenges*, vol. 3 no. 4 (November 2007), pp. 95-111.