

**FITTING AUSTRALIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY TO THE
CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT**

**Submission to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade**

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Introduction

As an island continent issues of maritime strategy are always going to be important for Australia. Nevertheless, maritime strategy cannot be considered in isolation from the broader national strategic context.

Accordingly, included as part of this Submission is a paper (RegRelev.pdf) I have prepared (to be published shortly by the Australian Defence Studies Centre at the Defence Force Academy) entitled *Regaining Relevance: Fitting Australia's Defence Force Structure to the Contemporary Strategic Environment*. This paper addresses Australia's strategic environment and draws conclusions as to the priorities which should inform our force structure decisions.

Below I set out for the Committee's convenience the principal points and conclusions of *Regaining Relevance*. After that I address specific issues of maritime strategy and force structure.

Principal Strategic and Force Structure Issues for Australia

Global strategic developments

- There have been major changes since the end of the Cold War. Though the threat of disastrous global nuclear war has largely evaporated, the risk of smaller numbers of nuclear weapons being used by some states has actually increased.
- The US is now the sole superpower. China still has a long way to go before its armed forces can be called modern or judged capable of significant power-projection, especially in a maritime environment. Russia's military reform program has stalled, and the security of its nuclear forces remains a concern.

Strategic terrorism: a new level of threat

- Terrorism now has the potential to inflict damage and losses on a scale approaching that of weapons of mass destruction. At this level, terrorism is a strategic force. The accidents at Chernobyl and Bhopal show that nuclear and chemical sites are particularly dangerous. Large transport aircraft are still vulnerable to seizure, and risks to sensitive national infrastructure widespread. The accident at Esso's Longford gas plant indicates infrastructure fragility. Aircraft are not the only threat.
- *Al Qaeda* may be severely damaged by the response to 11 September 2001, but it is probably only a matter of time before a terrorist group attempts to emulate or "improve" on the *Al Qaeda* precedent.

Australia's strategic circumstances

- Because possession is itself an advantage, Australia's difficult geography hinders potential military aggressors more than defenders. Nevertheless it forces certain choices on Australian strategic planners. Uncertainty, like geography, is an enduring factor in any strategic environment. *Per se*, it necessarily implies neither advantages nor disadvantages to military security.
- It is even more important than previously for states like Australia to distinguish clearly between military security *threats* and security *problems*. Treating problems as threats only leads to the generation of demands for military capability which limited state resources cannot hope to meet.
- Because of the high cost, Australia cannot go "all the way" with high-technology RMA options but, in the context of its strategic circumstances, must choose which capabilities to upgrade, which to maintain at lower (but still high) technology levels and which to avoid altogether.
- The character of Australian "regional engagement" has undergone a significant change in recent times. The emphasis is shifting from talks and exercises to cooperation on deployments, as in East Timor, and in counter-terrorism. It is to these coalitions, rather than with the US, that Australia is best resourced to contribute.
- The growing trend in American policy towards unilateralism and, in particular, military pre-emption, poses significant issues and risks for lesser states like Australia.

How secure is Australia?

- Australia is no more likely today to be involved in one-on-one military conflict with another country than previously. In fact, Australia has never been involved in such a conflict.
- Developments in regional military capabilities (including those of China) do not appear to pose traditional military threats to core Australian military security interests. There are, however, a number of problems which we need to address.
- But there are certain new, non-traditional, threats which are of concern. One is that we ourselves may be the target of terrorism even beyond what was experienced in Bali - that is, of strategic terrorism. Another, more remote, is that we may be called on to participate in a dangerous regional coalition war - eg, against China over Taiwan, or on the Korean peninsula.
- If power corrupts, then it is arguable that its abrupt elevation to the position of sole superpower has tended to corrupt US policy. Great caution will be required lest the United States draw us into a questionable pre-emptive coalition war.

Responses to the new environment

- The absence, over a period which is now measured in decades, of one-on-one conventional military threats to Australia strongly suggests that maintaining large force components with this threat as their principal justification is open to question.
- Irrespective of the resources we commit to advanced military technologies, Australia can make only symbolic, not decisive, contributions to US-led coalition operations. Therefore, we should commit only sufficient resources to advanced interoperability with the US to support these symbolic commitments. This releases resources for other purposes.
- The increasing level of demand for peace support operations mandates the maintenance of infantry units with excellent ground fighting skills supplemented by training in peace support. It also justifies mobility to deploy these units and strength, both air and maritime, sufficient to protect forces as they deploy and, if necessary, to support them post-deployment. Worst-case "exit strategies" may involve significant military operations.
- The need for effective patrolling and surveillance of the continental approaches is readily apparent. However, the ongoing use of major surface combatants on such duties is neither desirable nor sustainable, and the Navy's present emphasis on these limits Australia's ability to deploy assets suitable for border protection and surveillance.
- Only if we maintain that coalition warfare is probable and that Australia should devote the bulk of its defence budget to preparing for it (the present situation) can most existing priorities be justified.
- With costs a central issue, Australia simply cannot afford continually having to spend defence dollars to repair poor Defence management decisions.

New ADF force structure priorities

At a time when perceptions of what constitutes "security" are changing, the heavy emphasis on conventional war-fighting in Australian force structure looks somewhat old-fashioned. Because of rapidly rising acquisition and operational costs, both this emphasis and that on coalition war are proving difficult to sustain.

Priorities more in accord with the demands of Australia's security environment include:

- some de-emphasis (but not abandonment) of military capabilities intended for defence of the continent against traditional one-on-one threats;

- some reduction of resources directed at coalition warfare, but maintenance of the high technological capabilities coalition war requires (ie, less quantity, but maintenance of quality);
- some increase in deployable infantry, and maintenance of the means to deploy, protect and, if need be, extract them;
- enhancement of maritime, air and electronic surveillance of the continental approaches; and
- an increase in the scope and closeness of counter-terrorist intelligence sharing with allies and neighbours.

Because the capabilities to be de-emphasised (for coalition war and traditional continental defence) tend to be the most costly, these changes are fundable through re-allocation of resources inside the Defence portfolio.

Over-Emphasis of Conventional War-Fighting in Australian Maritime Strategy

Absence of traditional conventional military threats to Australia

It is important to note that the Prime Minister's statement that

...there is no likelihood of an attack on Australia in the conventional sense. Indeed the analysis we have had over recent weeks indicates that the likelihood of an attack on Australia in a conventional sense is even more remote now than it has been for some years.¹

supports the conclusions outlined above. Indeed, as the Annex notes, the Minister for Defence (Senator Hill) had already said much the same thing some time previously.²

This supports the proposition that there is now an over-emphasis in Australian strategy on conventional war-fighting and, in specifically maritime terms, on strategies intended to facilitate operations against conventional military forces and threats.

¹ Interview with Steve Liebmann, *Today Show*, Channel 9, 10 December 2002. Online at: <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/2002/interview2031.htm>.

² See the Minister's interview on the ABC TV program *Lateline*, 11 July 2002, available online at: www.abc.net.au/lateline/s604160.htm.

Emphasis on coalition warfare

In fact, the Navy appears increasingly to be geared for military operations in a coalition war environment, and only in this context can its present strategic approach and structure be justified.

Yet, as noted in *Regaining Relevance*, US-led coalition wars are very substantial affairs, usually involving hundreds of thousands of personnel and large numbers of combat aircraft and major surface combatants. No matter how heavily Australia invests in capabilities relevant to coalition operations, it has to be accepted as a matter of simple realism that we lack the resources to make decisive contributions to such campaigns.

In fact, our contributions have a primarily political and symbolic content: they are intended to signal our commitment to the alliance relationship with the United States.

While this is a legitimate use of the Defence Force, its over-emphasis has significant opportunity costs in terms of our ability to respond to the pressing demands of our environment. Accordingly, we should adjust priorities such that resources devoted to coalition operations do not exceed the level necessary to send the political signals referred to. Such an adjustment will free resources for more directly relevant maritime tasks.

Maritime Issues in the Modern Strategic Context

On present plans, the Navy expects to have 14 major surface combatants (8 FFH, 6 FFG), 6 submarines and 15 patrol craft (9 outgoing *Fremantle* class, 6+ new craft).¹ By 2030 it would also like to have, as well as much "next generation" equipment, "3 or 4" air warfare destroyers in inventory. The following table summarises these plans.²

FORCE ELEMENT GROUPS	FLEET IN BEING (2005)	ENHANCED FLEET (2015)	FUTURE FLEET (2030)
<i>Surface Combatants</i>	3 Upgraded FFG 3 FFG 1 Anzac FFH (ASMD Upgrade) 5 Anzac FFH	2 Air Warfare Destroyers (+1 or 2 Building) 4 Upgraded FFG 8 Upgraded Anzac FFH	3 or 4 Air Warfare Destroyers A mix of New Surface Combatants and upgraded Anzac FFH

¹ *Hansard* (Senate), 27 August 2002, Answer to Question No.276, p.3608 (proof edition).

² Royal Australian Navy, *Australia's Navy for the Twenty First Century 2001-2030*, Canberra 2001, p.18.

FORCE ELEMENT GROUPS	FLEET IN BEING (2005)	ENHANCED FLEET (2015)	FUTURE FLEET (2030)
<i>Submarines</i>	4 Upgraded Collins Class 2 Collins Class	6 Upgraded Collins Class	A mix of Next Generation Submarines and upgraded Collins Class
<i>Amphibious Lift</i>	1 Landing Ship Heavy (LSH) 2 Landing Platform Amphibious (LPA) 6 Landing Craft Heavy (LCH)	3 Large Amphibious Platforms ADF Watercraft Replacements	3 Large Amphibious Platforms ADF Watercraft Replacements
<i>Afloat Support</i>	1 Auxiliary Oiler 1 Fleet Replenishment Ship	2 Fleet Replenishment Ships	2 Fleet Replenishment Ships
<i>Mine Warfare</i>	6 Huon Class Coastal Minehunters 2 Auxiliary Minesweepers 2 Clearance Diving Teams	6 Huon Class Coastal Minehunters 2 Clearance Diving Teams	Next Generation Minehunting Platforms 2 Clearance Diving teams
<i>Aviation</i>	16 Seahawks 11 Seasprites 7 Seakings	16 Seahawks 11 Seasprites Utility Helicopters Possibly UAVs	Common type Warfare/Utility Helicopter UAVs
<i>Hydrographic</i>	2 Leeuwin Class 4 Paluma Class LADS (Laser Airborne Depth Sounder)	2 Hydrographic Ships Next Generation LADs type capability	2 Replacement Hydrographic Platforms Future Airborne System
<i>Patrol Boats</i>	13 Fremantle Class 2 Replacement Patrol Boats	Replacement Patrol Boats	Next Generation Patrol Platforms

There is much in these plans worthy of support, notably the emphasis on heavy lift capabilities. But although the absence of projected numbers for several platform types makes assessment difficult, it appears from the table, especially from the reference to air warfare destroyers (AWD), that the present emphasis on advanced major surface combatants is planned to continue. Such platforms, particularly of the AWD type, are among the most costly in the ADF inventory

Yet major surface combatants clearly have only one central role: maritime war-fighting. Bearing in mind the Government's view that " the likelihood of an attack on Australia in a conventional sense is even more remote now than it has been for some years", this

implies that the principal operational scenario for which these extensive capabilities are retained, even expanded over time, in the Navy's Order of Battle is coalition warfare.

In short the emphasis on major surface combatants, with their very large associated procurement and operational costs, does not address any strategic need directly relevant to the security of Australia. It does, however, deny resources to tasks which *are* relevant, especially in the maritime surveillance and interdiction role.

It is true, as happens at present, that major surface combatants can be tasked in this role. This is, however, rather like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut: it is an inefficient use of valuable warfighting assets. Clearly it is desirable that Australia have assets more appropriate to surveillance and interdiction missions.

However, as the present Opposition's recently announced Coastguard policy¹ shows, so long as present maritime force structure priorities are maintained, it is very difficult to find the resources to support surveillance and interdiction. The Opposition was only able to find money to fund three vessels for this purpose. With about 20,000 km of coastline and a huge Exclusive Economic Zone, Australia is going to need many more than three such vessels for effective surveillance. (In any case with three vessels it is probable that much of the time only two will be available due to scheduled maintenance, crew rotation issues and unpredictable malfunctions requiring rectification).

If there were some de-emphasis of the priority accorded major surface combatants, such that, eg, instead of the 14 planned for 2015 the Navy had, say, ten or eleven, substantial resources would be made available to meet needs more directly relevant to our strategic circumstances.

Conclusion

Australian maritime strategy, like the rest of its military security strategy, requires adjustment.

This does not involve the abandonment of capabilities now available, but it does involve de-emphasis. The capabilities which should be de-emphasised are:

- those intended primarily for conventional war-fighting against military aggressors seeking to attack Australia or its trade: this threat is acknowledged to be of low probability;

¹ Australian Labor Party, *An Australian Coastguard*, Policy Discussion Paper No.007, 27 November 2002. Online at: <http://www.alp.org.au/text.html?link=/media/1102/20003012.html>

- those intended primarily for coalition operations: such operations are too large for Australia to make decisive contributions; we should devote sufficient resources to this to satisfy the need for signalling support to allies, but no more.

These measures would release significant resources, which can be applied to:

- border protection via enhanced maritime surveillance and interdiction, with an adequate number of vessels designed and equipped for this task;
- deployment of Australian troops overseas on "peace support" missions. An increased maritime heavy lift and troop transport capability also confers greater general strategic mobility, especially for the Army.

The remaining major surface combatants (on this proposal, ten or eleven) provide adequate capabilities for coalition war and defence against the improbable conventional direct attack on Australia.

Annex: *Regaining Relevance: Fitting Australia's Defence Force Structure to the Contemporary Strategic Environment.* Forthcoming from the Australian Defence Studies Centre, ADFA.