

## The next Defence White Paper: the strategic environment

by Rod Lyon

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A Defence White Paper attempts to resolve—in the public arena—the central ‘puzzle’ of Australian strategy. That puzzle requires us to define the relationship between three core variables:

- a strategic environment largely beyond our own making
- our own role in the world
- and the constraints that bound that role.

A White Paper is not merely a clever academic paper. It requires us to make judgments, including judgments about our own strategic future and about how we manage risks in an uncertain world. The plausibility of the arguments underpinning those judgments will in turn be assessed, by Australians and others. In the short run, the White Paper will be assessed against the metrics that determine academic grades: are the arguments convincing, are the central claims supported by reasons and are the reasons supported by evidence? In the longer run, of course, and with the benefit of hindsight, the paper will also be judged by outcomes: how astutely Australian strategic policy unfolds in a variety of real-world situations.

### Strategic complexities

Telling the world how we see the strategic environment is itself a complex task. That environment defies easy portrayal. The thickening ties of globalisation are a potent indicator of global complexity. Moreover, the environment does not seem reducible to easy catchphrases of the sort we previously used to describe it. Cold War bipolarity has faded. Post-9/11, it has become harder to sustain the picture that some strategic analysts painted in the 1990s—the picture of a world divided between a ‘zone of peace’ and a ‘zone of war’. Power distributions are confusing: at the global level, we tend to talk of unipolarity, but at the regional level we often talk of multipolarity. The security agenda itself has become overloaded by the addition of a series of non-traditional security threats—everything from pandemics to human security issues to climate change—to the more traditional agenda based upon military threats to states. And global institutions (like the UN) look dated and unreformable, which means that each year that passes we are less able to solve the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century using the institutions of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>.

Across the spectrum of all those challenges is one even deeper and more haunting: the prospect that the Westphalian system which has served as the basis of the international system since 1648 may itself be eroding. The peace of Westphalia was built upon the agreement that states were to be the sole wielders of military force. But there is nothing written in stone to say that the Westphalian system will be a permanent feature of the international landscape. States have an interest in preserving the system, and the stronger the state the greater that interest. This is evident in the new international commitment to nation-building. Still, even strong Western states are now seizing opportunities to partner with non-state actors in pursuit of strategic objectives: witness the cooperation between the United States military forces and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001, for example. A world where we

declare war on some non-state actors, and partner with others, is a world where those actors are rapidly becoming more strategically important.

### **Harder**

In this more complex world, some actions are easier and some actions are harder. It has, for instance, become harder for nation-states to bring military force to bear on threats. Nowadays, we are often uncertain even about where the battlefield is. As Anna Simons, an academic at the US Naval Postgraduate School, has noted, conquest as a form of warfare might even be dead. Further, rapid military victories have become all but impossible in the forms of warfare that now predominate across the globe. Those are not trivial strategic issues: Western military forces—including Australia's—are optimised for conquest and decisive battle.

In the complex, globalised world it is harder, too, to set priorities on a geographic basis, and harder to solve security challenges that are essentially multidimensional. Perhaps most important of all, it is harder in that world to achieve desired outcomes by unilateral actions, even for the world's strongest powers. If the United States finds it hard to prevail unilaterally, why should we think it would be easier for us? For Australia, which has often thought of its priorities in geographical terms and taken solace from its ability to be self-reliant in the defence of its own continent, those are unhelpful developments.

### **Easier**

Conversely, it has become easier to move items across national borders, and to nurture linkages across those same borders. The world has become a network of globalised production chains for both industry and war, legal and illegal. The movement of fraudulent drugs, for example, draws heavily upon the world's free trade zones, where government regulation is minimal. The world moves increasingly towards modular assembly and 'just-in-time' solutions: as the authors of the Princeton Project on US National Security have noted, the business deal and the terrorist attack are conducted by groups that come together for only a short time, and which do not exist as standing entities.

And, just as conquest has become harder, raiding has become easier. Raiding has existed for centuries as the alternative form of warfare, but our knowledge of it has been obscured by our own fascination for decisive battles. Those cultures—primarily non-Western cultures—that traditionally raided placed great emphasis not upon gaining and holding territory but upon the showmanship of the attack, or the plunder to be gained; 9/11 signals the return of raiding to the forefront of Western strategic concerns.

### **Asia and the 'near arc'**

The complex global order is complemented by an Asian security order in flux. Strategic relativities are shifting in Asia as we witness the end of the post-WWII order of weakened Asian great powers. The regional great powers are all rising simultaneously, but with no history of security cooperation between them. In the long run, we might be witnessing the return of global leadership to Asia, but much more immediately we have to worry about the old security agenda of balance, deterrence and force modernisation. Fortunately, we have no reason to believe that the barriers to great-power conflict are any weaker in Asia than they are elsewhere. But we do have to beware our exposure to the possibly sharper strategic contests to our north: Australia has strong economic and strategic interests in Northeast Asia.

We also face the problems of the 'near-arc'; the problems of our own neighbourhood. On the whole, these are not world-shaping problems, but if Australia doesn't help to fix them, who will? If nobody helps, the problems will fester; if someone else helps, we lose sway over our immediate region. The problems are the developmental challenges faced by both small, fragile microstates in the South Pacific and the larger, more populous countries to our immediate north. These problems generally require durable ground-force commitments rather than high-technology military kit. They require the presence of a stabilising hand rather than a squadron of F/A-18s.

## **Australian options**

Australia can't create the international security environment in which it lives, although it can do a limited amount to shape that environment. But it has considerably more scope to determine the second part of the puzzle: deciding its own role in relation to that broader setting. Possible roles can broadly be allocated along a spectrum that would include policies of restraint at one end, and policies of engagement at the other.

At the 'restraint' end of the spectrum, we would:

- define our security interests narrowly
- use security instruments stingily
- contribute to responsibilities and costs on an equitable basis
- watch and wait more patiently.

At the 'engagement' end of the spectrum, we would:

- define our security interests broadly
- use security instruments more generously
- lead on responsibilities and costs
- act more rapidly.

Options at the engagement end of the spectrum tend to strengthen a country's role as an environment shaper; options at the restraint end of the spectrum leave more of that shaping role in the hands of others. For middle powers, in particular, it is typical for strategic decisions to shift along that spectrum in relation to different issues. Such countries choose to be engaged on some issues, restrained on others.

## **Australian 'strategic personality'**

The choice that Australia makes about its role in the world is shaped by a variety of factors. But on the whole, as a nation we have tended to prefer options drawn from the 'engagement' end of the spectrum. Those options seem to fit better with what we might call our 'strategic personality'. If we were to apply here the model of strategic personality, devised by Caroline Ziemke of the Institute for Defence Analyses, then it might be possible to describe Australia as an Extroverted, Sensing, Thinking (EST) state. Under the Ziemke model, these terms describe respectively a nation's orientation to the world, the information it pays most attention to, and the factors that dominate in its decision-making.

As an Extroverted nation, Australia judges that its Ultimate Concerns can't be satisfied at home. It sees its own growth and development as dependent upon interaction with other states, it takes a close interest in the international order, and it rejects strongly the idea that it might become stronger by cutting itself off from the outside world. As a Sensing nation, Australia pays attention to the sensory data of the world and doesn't 'intuit' that world from a vision of its own divine mission. Sensing states tend to be pragmatic in policy formulation, and have little patience with theories, visions or hypothetical speculations. And as a Thinking nation, Australian policy-makers decide matters by rationality rather than by emotions and feelings. In Australian history the classic example of this preference was John Curtin's 'Australia looks to America' statement in 1941: 'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.'

As an EST nation, Australia stands in some contrast to the United States, an Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling (ENF) nation under Ziemke's model. (It also stands in contrast to the Asian great powers, where China ranks as an Introverted, Sensing, Thinking state, Japan as an Introverted, Sensing, Feeling state, and India as an Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking state. Extroverted states in Asia are few and far between.) And, of course, if the Extroverted, Sensing and Thinking genes are the dominant ones in Australia's strategic personality, then introvertedness, intuition and sentimental decision-making are the recessive genes in the Australian strategic personality.

## **The problem of constraints**

Obviously, we can expect to encounter constraints in fulfilling our role of engagement in the world. Three in particular demand closer scrutiny:

- how do we set priorities in a world of complex and interwoven threats?
- how do we sustain 'strategic solvency' in such a world?
- how do we build a force structure that has optimal strategic utility in such a world?

The Defence White Paper will need to address those constraints to complete the story that it tells.

## **Priority setting**

Setting clear priorities is the key filter for separating those security issues which demand some level of engagement from us, and those on which we can choose not to engage. Previous White Papers have generally attempted to set those priorities by application of a simple geographic construct, what we might call the 'concentric circles' model of priority-setting. (Those unfamiliar with the model can see it deployed in White Paper 2000, Chapter 4.)

Unfortunately, the utility of setting priorities geographically declines in a globalised world—a world of increasing interconnectedness. Globalisation is essentially an enabling mechanism, which means that an increasing fraction of our security threats is likely to come from geographically distant regions. Already our security is threatened not merely by those traditional, distant, great-power contests (with which we have always felt a sense of engagement, regardless of the concentric circles model), but also by the much smaller war-making units with global reach (the units that raid, rather than conquer). Westerners have often despised raiding as a strategy, and even now many commentators say that we needn't take Al Qaeda as a serious strategic threat because it doesn't pose an 'existential threat' (i.e. a threat of conquest) to Australia. That judgment understates the strategic effects that global raiding can have in an age of technological diffusion. An advanced Western country could tolerate one 9/11, perhaps, but not many 9/11s, and especially not escalating 9/11s.

Still, there is one area of concern where we should be prioritising locally. In the world of intervention, peacekeeping, stabilisation, and reconstruction, we should be working principally, perhaps even exclusively, in the near region. Why? Australia is virtually unique amongst Western countries in living amongst developing states. We don't have the luxury of a typical Western European state, finding ourselves surrounded by other affluent, democratic, developed countries. Australians don't have to travel far from home to find as many developmental challenges as they can sensibly manage.

## **Strategic solvency**

All countries have to worry about strategic solvency. As Richard Armitage, former US Deputy Secretary of State, once noted, Australia is not a country of 100 million people and a big economy. It is a country of about 20 million people, and approximately the world's 15<sup>th</sup> largest economy. So Australia can be a force for good in the world, but only in limited doses. Sometimes, even when we know there is an urgent need for someone to do good in the world—Darfur, for example—we will need to decline assistance. Sometimes, even when there are important conflicts that engage our interests far afield, we will have to calibrate carefully our engagement.

The strategic solvency problem becomes sharper in a world without rapid victory. In a long war, sustainment becomes a key worry. And in a world of diffuse threats, it is critical to avoid threat conflation. Complexity is a genuine issue in the modern security environment. We have to recognise it, and not treat connected problems as unconnected. But we also need to beware endlessly conflating threats; it does us no good to conclude that everything is connected to everything else. The War on Terror is a good example of just how easy it is to conflate threats.

## **Force qualities**

We face a strategic environment that pulls us in multiple directions. In the old interstate war model, small wars and big wars essentially fell as points along the same line: a small war was

just a big war in microcosm, as it were, and the difference was essentially one of scale. But increasingly, small wars look to be something of a different genre to big wars, less amenable to a strategy of decisive battle and technological advantage. The threat spectrum, we might say, has lost linearity; it has certainly lost scaleability. Increasingly, strategists are being pulled towards the idea that military forces must be capable of fighting 'hybrid wars'.

We cannot be confident that the old world of interstate war is dead, especially with the Asian strategic environment undergoing its current transformation. So we cannot be indifferent to the world of conquest, even in a world where such conquest is becoming harder. Tipping our hat to Napoleon, we need some forces that can play the game of traditional, interstate warfare. But here we are most in need of a sensible metric against which to develop our forces. Are we sizing our forces for independent, robust action against one of the regional great powers? Are we scaling our forces to the geographic constraints of the sea-air gap? Are we trying to build a force that can work alongside our major ally in the vast majority of conflicts where our mutual interests are engaged? Are we intending to do all of the above? This type of conflict will demand more than skilled infantry: it will require high-technology capabilities that could play a role in high-intensity combat. Still, we ought to be sizing this part of the force on the judgment that we will probably not be fighting alone against a regional great power.

We must also have capabilities to counter—and perhaps to exploit—that part of the conflict spectrum that is becoming easier. In short, our Defence Forces should have some capacities to counter 'raiding'. Essentially, that means countering the 'global insurgents', as David Kilcullen calls them. Most Western militaries were never very good at countering insurgency when it was limited to one country; now that it has escaped national boundaries, they all need to get a lot better at this sort of mission. Perhaps we should also consider whether the ADF needs more options to raid strategically on Australia's behalf. After all, if we live in a world where raiding is easier, it is simply an efficiency to exercise such a use of force option ourselves. The unipolar power is still attempting conquest, and the small actors are already raiding: as a middle power, perhaps we ought to lean a little more towards the raiding end of the spectrum than the conquering end, in terms of our own use of force.

And thirdly, we need the forces that can conduct the intervention and stabilisation missions that are now typical around the South Pacific. Those forces need good civil-military skills, and will typically be the low-technology, 'presence' forces characteristic of long-lasting, peacekeeping missions. Such missions usually occur in relatively benign, rather than relatively belligerent, security environments. Their skill-sets of deployed troops need to emphasise more of the disciplines of anthropology and the social sciences than of the harder-edged military virtues. At this lower end of the mission profile, Defence will usually be working with a range of civilian partners, and there might be scope for designing and building specific forces for these kinds of roles. At this end of the mission profile, too, the opportunities to mesh defence policy with a broader national security policy are greatest.

Finally, it is increasingly likely that the ADF will be called out to perform some role in relation to domestic security—particularly in the wake of a major terrorist incident. The ADF must have some contribution it can provide to 'aid the civil power', although this will not be the primary focus of its existence.

## **Conclusion**

Writing a good White Paper will be a challenging exercise. The strategic environment is complex, and we ignore that complexity at our peril. We have to avoid the temptation to pole vault over that complexity, in the hope that we can return somehow to a simpler, earlier age of interstate warfare. Moreover, the things that Western militaries have traditionally done well—conquest and decisive battle—are becoming harder. So too, it is becoming harder to achieve outcomes unilaterally, a development that may be eroding Australia's preferred policy of self-reliant defence of the continent.

Critically, the White Paper will have to outline Australia's own role in the world. That means saying something about how we see our interests, how we intend to use our security instruments, how we approach issues of responsibilities and costs, and when we think action is appropriate. Australians will have a range of views on those questions, but the majority will probably still want to be strategically extroverted—'engaged'—in this complex security environment.

## About the Author

### Dr Rod Lyon

Dr Rod Lyon is ASPI's Strategy and International Program Director.

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ASPI

Tel + 61 2 6270 5100

Fax + 61 2 6273 9566

Email [enquiries@aspi.org.au](mailto:enquiries@aspi.org.au)

Web [www.aspi.org.au](http://www.aspi.org.au)

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