

Making strategic policy

What's involved?

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With preparations for the Defence White Paper 2015 well underway, both government and the public are probably more interested than usual in the esoteric topic of Australia's strategic policy. In this paper, I unpack some thoughts about that, but I'd like to come at the topic from a slightly unusual angle, by talking most about how strategic policy is—ideally—made.

Let me begin with a definition. I see strategy as the purposeful actions undertaken by an actor within a specific environment with the intention of shaping future outcomes to the actor's benefit. So, with that simple definition in mind, the structure of this paper is relatively straightforward. Making strategic policy means solving a puzzle in three parts: understanding an environment largely not of our own making; determining our own global and regional role; and acknowledging a set of constraints that bound that role. Good strategy turns upon a nuanced understanding of the world, the nature of its principal actors and points of leverage; a deep understanding of ourselves, our priorities and our intended outcomes; and an acceptance that we are what we are in terms of our commitments, our resources, our politics and our capabilities.



Image courtesy of Flickr user [Marko Mikkonen](#).

The first part of the puzzle

What's the world like? The question invites a protracted answer, but in the interests of brevity let's just start with the major features. It's a globalised, interconnected world characterised by power diffusion and strategic dynamism. Power's becoming more diffused as new great powers arise and as non-state actors play larger roles in international relations. In that sense, the rise of China and the rise of al-Qaeda are examples of the same phenomenon. We need to keep a sense of proportion about those observations: we're not seeing the decline of the state, as Martin van Creveld once forecast.¹ Strategic dynamism means that rising powers aren't growing within a static strategic order of the sort we saw between 1945 and 1990. Because of power diffusion and strategic dynamism, we're seeing a world of greater multipolarity and a more malleable strategic order.

In consequence, we're likely to see weakened leadership at both global and regional levels. In part that's because it takes longer to build winning coalitions when power is diffused, but it's also because the emerging powers don't always share the worldview of the more established powers. Some say, for example, that relatively weak civil societies among the fastest rising powers explain the drop-off in commitment to protection responsibilities abroad. And one direct effect of power diffusion is that the influence of both non-democracies and non-Western democracies upon international political change is increasing.²

The KOF Globalisation Index—which measures economic, social and political indices—suggests that in recent years globalisation has stagnated.³ The index for 2012, the latest year for which data is available, shows little change from that of 2007. Still, the index has plateaued at a relatively high level. Globalisation enriches and binds. Those least enmeshed—Solomon Islands, Somalia, Kiribati, Laos and Eritrea—aren't persuasive advertisements for the non-globalised path. The bulk of the world is a virtual Gondwanaland of interconnectedness: of trade, financial flows, travel, communications, disease vectors and organised crime.

One thing interconnectedness hasn't done—and some thought it would—has been to make hard power obsolete. Indeed, in 2015 hard power remains relevant in international relations—useful still in both direct and gravitational ways:

The war-waging use of military power is akin to a powerful flood: it washes away all before it. The peaceful use of military power is akin to a gravitational field among large objects in space: it affects all motion that takes place, but it produces its effects imperceptibly. The effects of floods are dramatic and easy to pinpoint; those of gravity seem more mundane and are harder to discern. A flood demonstrates its effects by its presence; a gravitational field by its absence. Most of the time the effect of military power looks more like gravity than a flood ... Thus, to focus only on the physical use of military power is to miss most of what most states do most of the time with the military power at their disposal.⁴

That observation is still pointedly true in relation to the hardest form of power of all, nuclear weapons. Because force is still an important variable, strategic analysts continue to be interested in its use. But interconnectedness has helped to drive a major reformulation of the security agenda, expanding it to include both traditional and non-traditional threats. The agenda is now *broader* because it includes more threats than inter-state military force. And it's *deeper* because it includes threats to referents other than nation-states. Overall, that's made for a more complex and muddled security agenda in which setting priorities has become more difficult.

Problematically, we're trying to address that agenda through a world of only partially reformed institutions. In recent years, we've found it relatively easy to grow a G20 as the G8 starts to look more *passé*. But we can't change security institutions as easily as economic ones, and the UN Security Council is the case in point. The West has grown no new post-Cold War alliances, but nor have US allies been keen to throw those alliances away. And one of its existing alliances, NATO, has certainly expanded dramatically in recent decades.

Still, coalitions and strategic partnerships constitute the more typical 21st-century form of strategic bonding. Saudi Arabia currently leads a coalition attacking Houthi rebels in Yemen; the US leads a coalition of countries attacking Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; and 'strategic partnerships'—a term with a variety of meanings—abound in every direction.

At the level of grand strategy, the largest question about the current strategic environment is whether we're seeing a Westphalian order in retreat. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 made states the sole authorities entitled to wield military power. And for some centuries only states have had the weight and power to be real war makers. In the 21st century, states are still the largest of the potential war makers, but they're facing the rise of determined, agile, non-state actors able—on occasion—to exploit globalisation to exercise force at intercontinental distances, and willing to bear the costs of the physical use of force. Against those actors, the hard power capabilities of large states are of limited effectiveness.

In one sense, though, the world hasn't changed: the most dangerous strategic opponent we might face would still be a revisionist great power. Great powers willing and able to use force to change the international order—whether by coercion or direct military action—constitute the most menacing adversaries. And great-power war is still the variety of conflict in which casualties and costs would rise most steeply. Do revisionist great powers now stalk the earth? The two that attract most attention, Russia and China, seem to be only limited revisionists: their menace is felt most strongly among those close to their peripheries, and they engage in cooperative as well as competitive behaviour. China, in particular, presents Janus-like faces to the international community—as economic partner and as partial strategic revisionist. The recent behaviour of both countries raises a deep, troubling and as yet unanswered question: how revisionist do they have to be before we need to worry?

But globalisation has also empowered a second worrying opponent: the revisionist non-state actor. Small groups are increasingly capable of causing pain across state boundaries. More Americans died on 9/11 than died at Pearl Harbor, although of course far fewer have died—at least so far—in the Global War on Terror than in World War II. Moreover, those actors can have mischievous effects on inter-state relationships, and sometimes represent that cat's paw of deniable state action, like the 'little green men' in the Ukraine.

In this world, it's harder to do some things and easier to do others. What's harder? Well, for one thing—and 21st-century experience shows it well—it's often harder for nation-states to bring military force to bear on threats, not least because it's hard to identify the centre of gravity of a threat. Similarly, it's hard to solve security challenges that are essentially multidimensional: Afghanistan, for example, wasn't just about attacking al-Qaeda's training facilities there, but also removing their Taliban supporters from government. That, in turn, meant addressing the place of the Pashtun ethnic group in the region, and the cross-border sanctuaries that the militants enjoyed in Pakistan. India–Pakistan relations became a factor in the conflict. So did Afghan underdevelopment.

Strategic complexity isn't the sole generator of difficulty. International norms make some things harder—conquest, for example. Globalisation makes some things harder—it's harder to be unilateral and self-reliant in the modern world. And interconnectedness makes some things harder—it's harder to prioritise on a geographical basis, for instance. Still, interconnectedness hasn't made all regions of the world equally strategic important. The key 'front lines' of the modern world are still the balances along the Eurasian rimlands, plus of course the continuance of a stable global strategic nuclear relationship between the two nuclear giants, the US and Russia.

So, what's easier? Well, watch the news. We live in a world of porous borders and interconnectedness. Crossing borders is so easy that a refugee can often do it over intercontinental distances. Interconnectedness makes for a world of globalised production chains for both industry and war. The people-trafficking industry is one of those. Modular assembly and 'just-in-time' solutions are increasingly found in everything from national health systems to terrorism. The 'liquids on airplanes' issue is a classic. No one person brings a bomb onto a plane. By bringing together different liquids, the bomb is built on the plane—a beautiful case of just-in-time production.

In conflict terms, this is a world of easy 'raiding'. Raiding is an old form of warfare. It's war fought by hitting and running. That's al-Qaeda's principal tactic; that's why we struggle to bring them to battle. But raiding has opportunities for nation-states too, and not just for the weak. Raiding can be an enabler in conflict. Military planning should include options to seize an adversary's airfield for six hours or twelve hours, for example, so the principal question becomes a just-in-time one: which six hours would be most useful, and why?

Let's turn to the Asian security order. Here the big strategic question is, 'What are the consequences of a more dynamic Asia?' The shape of that dynamism is unfolding more slowly than the simple growth of strategic 'weight' in Asia. The world's not only seeing a shift of weight to Asia, but a shift of weight within Asia. In Cold War days, the regional strategic centre of gravity could be found somewhere around the Korean peninsula; the weight of the USSR and Japan helped ensure that. But neither the USSR nor Japan provided contesting Asian narratives: the USSR was a lopsided dumbbell with all the weight at the European end, and post-WWII Japan was in no position to retail an independent strategic policy. In the years since, the centre of gravity has moved southwest: the USSR's collapsed, Japan's stalled, and we've seen a burst of growth in China, India and Southeast Asia.

Asian major powers—with little history of strategic cooperation at the top-tier and second-tier levels—are engaged in both a spatial and a positional competition for influence. Nationalism underpins that competition and cuts away at the internationalist ethic required to strengthen the key pillars of the regional order. A saving grace is that, despite Xi Jinping's talk of 'Asia for the Asians', the region's fastest-rising great power, China, doesn't yet retail a narrative of a different regional order.

That growth in Asian weight and shifting centre of gravity are also the driver of the US rebalance—a rebalance within Asia and not merely to Asia. But the pivot's occurring during a fading of Western influence in Asia (see Coral Bell's book, *The end of the Vasco da Gama era*), making the story harder to tell. Still, while Asian powers are once more making their influence felt in the region we're unlikely to see Asia return to the closed system that it was before 1850. What we're seeing, though, is what Paul Bracken once called 'contracting strategic geography'⁵: the various sub-regions are being pulled more closely together by expanding power bubbles, longer range weapons and new forms of economic interlinkage (such as energy flows).

Without trying to solve all of Asia's challenges here, let me just say that dynamism in Asia is neither enemy nor friend to Australia's own strategic policy—but it is a complication.

Finally, I'll say something about the problems of our neighbourhood. Those problems aren't world-shaping, but if we don't fix them, who will? The fragile states of the South Pacific are no longer the self-righting boats we thought they were in earlier decades. In the era of Pacific island independence, we put a lot of reliance on a generation of well-educated Pacific leaders, the peaceful transitions to independence, and the fact that the islands had strong societies—often religious ones—even where they had weak states. But in the late 1990s we saw a 'second age' of South Pacific security: some of the advantages had rolled back, and external interest in the region was going up.

There's a second layer of neighbourhood problems, if we stretch the definition a little, and those include the developmental challenges of Indonesia and near Southeast Asia. What, if anything, can we do to help solve those challenges? The basic trajectory of Indonesia—towards the consolidation of democratic institutions and steady economic growth—bodes well for the future bilateral relationship. Moreover, Australia and Indonesia are the two largest powers within the sub-region. But our relationship is still a fraught one, frequently marred by controversy and misunderstanding. And the Jokowi government in Indonesia doesn't seem to be the vehicle for a broader reform movement: political power does not, at first glance, seem more widely shared, nor corruption much diminished.

In our near neighbourhood, most problems require durable engagement rather than high-tech military kit. We don't really need a squadron of Joint Strike Fighters for the South Pacific, for example. We might need one for an 'Indonesia gone bad' scenario, but we've been waiting a long time for that scenario to unfold, and today Indonesia looks more like our strategic partner than it ever has before.

A nuanced understanding of the environment is important. It shapes strategic choices. The strategy of containment during the Cold War, for example, reflected a judgement that containment had a purpose: it was designed to allow the communist system to fall victim to its own seeds of destruction. A close understanding of today's environment is just as necessary, regardless of whether it relates to the agendas of Russia and China, the ambition and reach of non-state terrorist groups or the tempo of reform in Indonesia.

The second part of the puzzle

Let's turn to the notion of Australia as actor. In theory, this is the 'middle bit' of any Defence White Paper. It supposedly holds together how we see the world and the capabilities we plan to use to defend against perceived threats. But in a grander sense it asks us about Australia's optimal 'design' for the world, because that design gives meaning and purpose to our strategic policy.

As a country, we are what we are: an arid island continent, situated not along the strategically important Eurasian rimlands but at some distance from them, and in the Southern Hemisphere. We have a large continent, a small population and an economy dominated by the mining, farming and service sectors.

How do we see our own role in the world? Being reductionist, let me say that Australian grand strategy hasn't changed since white settlement. We were born into a world of Western advantage, and our strategy has been to seek a secure Australia within that stable, liberal, prosperous global order. True, that order has faced challenges over the years, some of them existential, but it endures. So I don't believe we're engaged in a search for a new grand strategy. Rather, we seek a way to achieve our traditional objective in the 21st century. Some argue that our grand strategy should be the encouragement of a power-sharing arrangement in Asia. But that's distinctly a minority position in Australian strategic thinking.

Still, in recent years Australian strategy has been marked by debate rather than consensus. Defence and security issues are typically seen as points of bipartisan agreement in Australian politics. That's true—until it's not. Compare the prime ministerships of John Howard after 9/11 and Kevin Rudd. Howard spelled out a series of specific strategic positions about the privatisation of war, our proximity to the US, ANZUS as a global alliance, and the importance of the army. Rudd argued against all those positions: the 2009 Defence White Paper emphasised a 'return to classic settings' in Australian strategic thinking—a pull-back towards inter-state warfare, self-reliance, ANZUS as a regional alliance, and the importance of the maritime services.

A second example can be seen in the 'battle of the White Papers'. On top of the 2009 Defence White Paper, the Gillard and Rudd governments produced three White Papers over their final 18 months: one on the Asian century, one on national security and (another) one on defence. The Abbott government is currently writing its own Defence White Paper. That flurry of official declaratory policy suggests that the environment is complex and that strategic choices aren't clear-cut, but also that bipartisanship mightn't be as strong as some believe.

One way of looking for consistency in Australian strategic policy is to look for longer-lived drivers, such as strategic culture or strategic personality. Caroline Ziemke, an analyst at the US Institute for Defense Analyses in 2001, saw an opportunity to apply the Myers-Briggs personality model to states.⁶ Under that model, we'd qualify as 'Extroverted, Sensing and Thinking'. (By comparison, the US qualifies as 'Extroverted, Intuitive and Feeling'.)

- We're extroverted because our 'ultimate concerns' can't be satisfied at home.
- We 'sense' the world and don't 'intuit' it—we don't write proclamations about 'self-evident truths'.
- And we work by thought rather than emotion in international affairs—most classically when shifting our allegiance from Britain to the US during World War II.

Introversion, intuition and feelings are, therefore, the 'recessive genes' of our personality. They're still there: as Michael Wesley says, sometimes we're 'insular internationalists'.⁷ But those genes aren't the primary drivers of our strategic policies.

So, what sort of Australia can we expect to see acting in the world? That's a question not easily answered, for in truth there are several models of Australian strategic behaviour. First, there's the Australia born of empire, which still finds its identity in historical ties. The reflexive response to such statements is to say we've long outgrown our ties to Britain, and in large measure that's true. But we never voted for a republic; the Queen of England is still Australia's head of state.

Second, there's the Australia that bandwagons with the dominant Western maritime power of the day and feels a close attachment to great and powerful friends. That model at least has the merit of providing an accurate one-line description of our strategic history, even if it misses a lot of nuance in our relationships with both Britain and the US over the decades.

Third, there's the Australia that wants to be both a middle power and a good international citizen. That Australia's a rule-designer and institution-builder. Middle power theory tends to favour coalition-building and creativity in foreign policy—though, typically, at the expense of great-power relationships. Running the strategic personality model alongside the middle power theory, we might conclude that Australia is an extroverted, sensing, thinking institution-builder—less fixated on values and more inclined to find pragmatic work-arounds to maintain a stable, liberal, prosperous order in Asia.

Fourth, there's the Australia that sees itself as a second-tier, but definitely Top 20, power. That's the muscular Asian power that predominated in the pages of the 2009 Defence White paper: an upscaled military actor with double-digit numbers of submarines and possibly triple-digit numbers of fighter aircraft.

Fifth, there's the Australia that's a mix of all the above—which partly explains why our strategic identity is a fractured one. Across the different 'Australias' there's a broad theme favouring activism and partnership. This is a country that's never gone to war alone, and whose greatest battle casualties have been sustained a long way from home.

Different White Papers have placed different emphases upon those different 'Australias'. The 2009 paper, for example, stressed Australia's role as a muscular, self-reliant power, reluctant to seek assistance from its ally unless it were to find itself entangled in a conflict with a great power. The 2013 paper placed more stress on our role as an order-builder, and saw strategy as an 'upstream' political activity and not just a 'downstream' military response. Each White Paper in turn invited criticism from those who believed that it portrayed not merely the environment, but Australia's strategic identity, incorrectly.

And that brings us to a separate part of the question: the issue of commitment level. When we ask how Australia should act in the international security environment, we're not just asking what possible role we want to play. We're also asking how intensely we want to play it. Putting it more colloquially, how much buy-in do we want to the world's many and varied problems?

Here, it's best to imagine a commitment 'spectrum' that has restraint at one end and engagement at the other. At the restraint end of the spectrum, we define our security interests narrowly, use our security instruments stingily, share out responsibilities and costs more equitably, and watch and wait more patiently. At the engagement end, we define our security interests broadly, use our security instruments more generously, lead on responsibilities and costs, and reject the role of the watchful observer.

With our emphasis on order-related outcomes, Australia typically seeks an ordering benefit from any commitment. And we might well choose to be engaged and restrained on different parts of the security portfolio. Since WWII, it hasn't been unusual for Australia to 'calibrate' its level of engagement in a conflict far from home, especially in cases where it believes that order-related issues are more tangential. Broadly speaking, we can calibrate both the size of the force we deploy and the nature of the risks we accept. Several White Papers have argued that, as crises get closer to the Australian mainland, we lose the options available at the restraint end of the spectrum. That's probably true, but there are still gradations to the spectrum; it's not just a binary choice.

The third part of the puzzle

Let's turn to the third part of the puzzle: the constraints. In reality, many things constrain us, but here I want to talk about four factors in particular. Each holds us 'prisoner' by limiting our freedom to act in the world. The first factor is our declaratory settings, which make us a prisoner of our own mouth. The second factor is solvency, which makes us a prisoner of our wallet. The third factor is the need for public support for a strategic policy, which makes us a prisoner of our political system. And the fourth factor is capacity, which makes us a prisoner of our existing capabilities. This is the area where the rubber meets the road, where strategic policy ideas press up against the defined priorities, the affordable, the sellable and the doable.

Past declaratory policy—set out in the history of White Papers and ministerial statements—codifies what we think is important in the world. Broadly, those declaratory settings tie us to the defence of Australia, the ANZUS alliance and Asian engagement—a set of pillars that we’d find it hard to abandon. If we did abandon them, would we sound credible? If we said we wanted to be neutral and non-aligned, for example, whom would we convince?

Solvency. We’re a country of only 23.8 million people and, on a purchasing power parity basis, perhaps the world’s 18th largest economy. Even if we want to be a force for good in the world, we’re going to run out of resources relatively quickly. That means partnerships must be central to our policy. And we have to be careful to avoid strategic overreach. That debate sometimes unfolds as an argument about ‘wars of choice’ versus ‘wars of necessity’—which is pretty phraseology, but less useful as a guide to practical policy (people differ on what’s necessary). Besides, wars of necessity don’t come along every day. And it’s not necessarily a wise husbanding of resources to tell an ally that we can’t support them in Iraq in 2003 because we’re waiting for the grand strategic clash of 2020.

Public support. In the long run, Australian foreign and defence policy must reflect not merely what the government of the day wants but also what the public wants. But public support waxes and wanes: after 9/11, the public wanted something different from what it wants now. In almost all countries now, domestic priorities trump foreign ones. True, governments typically lead on foreign policy and can ignore adverse public opinion for short periods, but in democracies the blunt instrument of the electoral cycle sets limits on decision-makers.

Legacy forces. One of the main constraints on our strategic options is what we can and can’t do with our existing capabilities. Capabilities can change over time—we can build a different ADF and a bigger Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—but on Day 1 of the crisis, we’ve got what we’ve got. We’re not even entirely sure what we’re going to need more of. Do we need more counterinsurgency forces? More high-technology, high-intensity combat capabilities? More intervention capacities and a Peace Corps? More capacity to provide aid to the civil power? The range of demands upon us means we want to remain versatile in a world of multiple threats. Above all, we don’t want an ADF that’s a one-trick pony.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I haven’t attempted to solve the dilemmas of Australian strategic policy. I’ve just sketched a framework for thinking about those dilemmas. By providing that framework, I hope to put some earlier generalisations about strategy-making into a broader context; for example, the generalisation that if we haven’t talked dollars we haven’t talked strategy. Yes, dollars are one of the constraints. But we can talk a lot about dollars without solving the other parts of the puzzle, and that leaves us just as badly off.

Similarly, this way of thinking about strategy provides a framework within which the argument over whether civilians or military people are better at thinking strategically becomes self-answering. Frankly, there’s nothing special about either. Good strategists, able to think about the world, Australia’s role in it and the constraints that limit that role, might well emerge from either civilian or military backgrounds. A more limited definition of strategy—one relating specifically to the use of military force—might yield a different answer, but even there an important difference exists between knowing how to use force and deciding when to use it.

We have to build Australian strategic policy in a complex security environment, sometimes uncertain about our own role, and seriously constrained in our ability to shape the world. In the three parts of the puzzle lie the core of all the current contests in Australian strategic policy. The environment is complex and transformational, we’re arguing among ourselves about the sort of purposeful actions and outcomes that would best suit our interests, and the constraints seem to press in upon us from all sides. After a steady stream of White Papers over the past six years, our declaratory policy seems confused. Ongoing budget deficits cast doubts over promises to increase defence spending as a percentage of our GDP. Our citizens remain staunch supporters of the alliance relationship and the ADF, but seem mute or divided on new partnerships in Asia. We devote considerable time to debating issues of force structure.

The Defence White Paper of 2015 has much ground to cover.

Notes

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- 6 Caroline Ziemke, *Strategic personality and the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence: deterring Iraq and Iran*, IDA paper P-3658, Institute for Defense Analyses, Virginia, 2001.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
GDP	gross domestic product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations

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