

Defence strategic review

Submission

Allan Behm

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Level 1, Endeavour House, 1 Franklin St
Canberra, ACT 2601
Tel: (02) 61300530
Email: mail@australiainstitute.org.au
Website: www.australiainstitute.org.au
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Introduction

The Federal Government is to be congratulated for initiating the current Defence Strategic Review into the circumstances in which decisions relating to Australia's force posture and force structure are taken.

The review's Terms of Reference do not specifically address the underlying principles of Australia's strategic policy. However, its intentions—to examine force disposition, preparedness, strategy and associated investments—themselves require some reaffirmation of the basic principles of Australia's strategic policy. A strategic policy that places a premium on expeditionary deployment of Australian forces in pursuit of Australia's strategic interests will invoke quite different decisions on force structure and associated force posture than would a strategic policy that places a clear emphasis on the ability to act in the direct defence of Australia.

It is clear, however, that this review is primarily directed at force posture and force structure, which is where this submission begins.

Force posture

“Force posture” is a term of art that gained contemporary currency just over a decade ago. The 2012 Force Posture Review (“the 2012 Review”),¹ commissioned by former Defence Minister Stephen Smith (one of the two principals of this review), took a relatively narrow approach to defining the term:

. . . ‘Force posture’ [is] a multifaceted concept, embracing:

- a. bases (in their various manifestations such as major bases and home ports, forward operating bases and mounting bases), facilities and training areas; and
- b. activities such as operational deployments, port visits, training exercises, international engagement activities, familiarisation visits and consultative forums which enable and demonstrate the ADF’s capacity to meet the strategic tasks required of it by the Government.

Defence’s current force posture has been shaped by a range of factors and events, including the evolution of Australia’s defence strategy since Federation, mobilisation for the First and Second World Wars, and trends in Australia’s demographic and economic profile. Changes in Australia’s defence strategy from the late 1960s to the 1980s resulted in rebalancing force disposition and posture towards Western and Northern Australia. In particular, the 1987 Defence White Paper led to the establishment of a ‘Two Ocean Navy’, an increased Army presence in Northern Australia, the completion of Air Force’s ‘Northern chain’ of air bases and the permanent basing of fighter aircraft at RAAF Base Tindal.

The 2012 Review dealt with the location and adequacy of Australia’s defence bases. In previous decades, Defence examined whether Australia’s defence bases, which are located mostly in southern Australia, best supported the emerging focus on warfare conducted in Australia’s maritime approaches (the sea-air gap) and in northern Australia.

The solution was not to relocate the southern bases, but to construct new operational bases and “bare bases” (that would depend on fly-in-fly-out infrastructure) in northern Australia. As such, the 2012 Review made a number of recommendations premised on

¹ Hawke and Smith (2012) Australian Defence Force Posture Review, <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/adf-posture-review-report.pdf>

the need for the ADF to conduct and sustain “high tempo operations in Northern Australia and our approaches, the immediate neighbourhood and the wider Asia-Pacific region” (p. i).

The 2012 Review argued that power shifts in the Asia and Pacific region “reinforce[d] the need for a force posture that can support ADF operations in Australia’s Northern approaches; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in our neighbourhood; stabilisation operations in the South Pacific and East Timor; and enhanced cooperation with the United States and regional partners”. It recommended the expansion and upgrading of defence operating bases in northern Australia, along with the construction of logistics and support facilities able to sustain high ADF operational demands. However, it did so without much consideration of the opportunity costs such investments might impose on the national budget in general or the defence budget in particular.

A decade later, some of these expansions and upgrades have been undertaken. Some remain to be done.

The election of a new federal government, and the appointment of a new Minister who shares some of the strategic concerns of his predecessor, has generated another force posture review to help address the continuing change in the strategic balance in Asia. (This rationale is often taken as code for the growing fear of China’s rise among the allies of the US and, of course, the US itself.)

THE DEFENCE MINISTER’S “PORCUPINE”

The current Defence Minister, Richard Marles, warned recently that Australia needs to turn itself into a “porcupine” island,² fortified with enough lethal weaponry to deter an attack from a hostile rival. His statement is a stark illustration of the dangerous strategic environment that the Minister fears the nation faces.

Porcupines, hedgehogs and echidnas offer a homely image of the defence and deterrence that small creatures might employ against larger predators. Such imagery is often used in describing nations such as Taiwan, where it conveys the sense of a defence system bristling with defensive force elements able to operate in confined spaces over short distances. Such a force posture may be sensible for Taiwan, where a tripwire may be needed to invoke a US response to a putative threat from China

² Knott (2022) “‘We need to be a porcupine’: Marles says Australia must project lethal force”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/we-need-to-be-a-porcupine-marles-says-australia-must-project-lethal-force-20220826-p5bd3x.html>

(dangerous though that would be). Similarly, Singapore has long used the “poisoned shrimp” metaphor to dramatise the massive strategic indigestion that the absorption of a small, and relatively weak, nation might cause to a much bigger adversary that sought armed conquest.

However, the posture seems less appropriate for Australia: given the country’s size and the vast distances involved, the porcupine would be either huge (and prohibitively expensive) or its quills rather threadbare. If Marles’s image was intended to guide the two force posture reviewers, former Defence Minister Stephen Smith and former CDF Sir Angus Houston, they might be well advised to exercise caution before they adopt a defensive force posture that might fundamentally ignore the realities of Australia’s strategic position and the principles that might inform planning in a changing world.

Ultimately, Australia’s force posture needs to reflect its strategic interests: the ability to defend the continent against credible armed threats, and the ability to co-operate with neighbours to contribute to regional strategic stability and national security. While China’s current and prospective military capabilities may well support an attack on Australia, there is no compelling evidence that China has the motive or the intent to employ armed force against Australia. As such, to base Australia’s force posture on such a potential threat is to premise significant levels of defence expenditure on conjecture. Australia’s strategic and defence planning, including its force posture planning, must be based on more robust principles than that.

Force posture based on first principles

The current review comes at a time when one of its two principals, former Chief of the Defence Force Sir Angus Houston, describes Australia's strategic environment as "the worst [he] has seen in [his] career and lifetime".³ This judgement echoes the pervasive fear of Chinese militarism and aggression expressed by Peter Dutton in early 2022, when he was Defence Minister under the Morrison government.⁴

It is a big claim to state that contemporary strategic circumstances are the worst in over seventy years: it is to ignore the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency, the *Konfrontasi* with Indonesia, the Vietnam War, the end of the Soviet Union, the Iraq War and the long engagement in Afghanistan. While we might lament the growing challenges to the "international rules-based order"—a term that is itself a form of new-speak for the post-WW2 American imperium—reviews of this kind must recognise that change, and the chaos that underpins change, are intrinsic to the constant adjustments in power that characterise the global order, rules-based or not.

This submission suggests that the current force posture review needs to adopt a significantly more reflective and analytical posture if it is to avoid the "more of the same" approach that distinguishes most Australian defence reviews. The review will also need to address the fact that the times are as confusing as they are uncertain.

A common by-product of confusing times is policy confusion: if goals are unclear, so too is direction. This confusion is compounded when consequences (in this case, Australia's force posture) are confused with causes (in this case, the basic objectives of Australia's strategic policy). In such times, it is instructive to return to first principles, which can be summarised as follows:

- National interests drive strategic policy;
- Strategic policy drives defence policy;
- Defence policy drives force structure; and,

³ Tillet (2022) "'Worst' strategic circumstances prompt Defence Force review", *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/worst-strategic-circumstances-prompt-review-20220803-p5b6vz>

⁴ Galloway (2022), "Australia will 'lose next decade' unless it stands up to China: Dutton", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-will-lose-next-decade-unless-it-stands-up-to-china-dutton-20220112-p59ntk.html>

- Together, defence policy and force structure drive force posture. (More details of what force posture actually constitutes will follow a little later.)

It is therefore important to set out the principal considerations that should inform any review of Australia's force posture and force structure. This is especially true given that the defence policy domain has been muddied somewhat in recent years by the political adventurism entailed in AUKUS and the capability adventurism entailed in the sudden rush to acquire nuclear powered submarines.

Australia's perception of the world in which it lives, and on which it depends economically and strategically, has been challenged greatly over the last few decades. Significant contributors to this sense of disruption include the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union; the ineluctable rise of China; the ever-changing power balance between the US and its competitors (especially China); the growing confidence of the Asian nations (especially the original ASEAN members); and the UK's changing status in Europe.

Disruption compounds change and magnifies confusion. The geoeconomic, geopolitical and geostrategic forces that shape Australia's strategic environment continue to evolve as changes in relative economic strength and power relationships continue to accelerate. In all of this, however, Australia has considerable agency. The challenge for the Australian government and its policy makers is to demonstrate the insight, ability and confidence in exercising that ability to turn its national power—the source of its agency—to advantage. That is statecraft.

The elements of national power

To do this, it is essential that we understand both the nature of power and the elements of national power. Like “posture”, the term “power” is not univocal: it has many meanings, takes many forms and exists in many dimensions. It extends from influence and persuasion (the forms fundamental to diplomacy) to intimidation and coercion (the forms upon which military power and deterrence rely). Power may be innate and subtle. It may be overt and menacing.

Power—together with the ability both to acquire and to confer it—is an essential dimension of leadership, because without power there can be no authority, credibility or legitimacy. These are the necessary components of leadership, and without them leadership, whether at the global, national or individual level, transforms itself into impotence—and leadership, the ability to influence and shape rather than to control and direct, should be a key objective in Australia’s exercise of its national power.

In his magisterial *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau points out that the nation is not “an empirical thing”.⁵ It is an abstraction—and so is national power. The latter only takes physical form and has physical effect when it is exercised by the individuals who act on behalf of the nation. What is at one level an intriguing metaphysical construct is given effect through the agency of national leaders. And to give power effect, leaders must know what power is before they can employ it.

Australia’s leaders generally display a slender understanding of the national power they seek to exercise on the international stage, and an even more slender grip on the levers of national power. They certainly display aspiration, though in Australia’s case aspiration is rarely substantiated by leaders’ confidence. More often, their agency is constrained by a bumbling bonhomie or an ingratiating insouciance. From Menzies and his abortive attempts to defend British imperial power during the Suez crisis⁶ to Morrison and his confirmation of Australia’s freeloader climate change status at the Glasgow COP,⁷ Australian leaders have too frequently painted Australia as jejune and its national power as trivial.

⁵ Morgenthau (1948) *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A. Knopf, p73

⁶ Evans (2019) “How not to conduct Australian foreign policy: Suez 1956”, <https://www.gevans.org/speeches/Speech710.html>

⁷ Behm (2021) “Foreign policy and global warming: implications for Australia”, Evatt Foundation, <https://www.evatt.org.au/post/foreign-policy-global-warming-implications-australia-behm>

Yet Australia's national power is far from trivial. Morgenthau identifies eight principal components of national power,⁸ four of which he groups as relatively stable, and the other four as subject to constant change. In terms of the four stable components—geography (Australia is, after all, the sole occupant of a continent), natural resources, industrial capacity and military preparedness—Australia is well positioned. Together, these substantiate Australia's position as the thirteenth largest economy, with all that entails (though one might be forgiven for thinking that many of Australia's leaders do not quite appreciate this).

Of the four more volatile components, Morgenthau identifies three as “the human factors”. The first is population, which is evidently a constraint on Australia's national power. Australia ranks 56th in global terms, and some argue that population is a matter of major strategic importance for Australia. Lowy Institute Executive Director Michael Fullilove, for example, argued in “Foreign policy begins at home”, one of his 2015 Boyer Lectures, that “there is a case for looking at [a] ... larger [population], in order to add to our strategic and economic weight”.⁹ As Morgenthau put it, “With the population of either Australia or Canada, the United States could never have become the most powerful nation on earth”.¹⁰

In terms of the other two “human factors”—national character and what Morgenthau terms “national morale” (the alignment between the citizens and the government to create endurance and resilience)—Australia performs well by any international comparison. Australia's political life is stable by any international standard. For all its social and ethnic diversity, Australia is largely an inclusive society characterised by high levels of tolerance and equality. Australia also enjoys high levels of social amenity, by various measures. Five of Australia's cities—Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth and Canberra—rank highly in terms of liveability. Five of Australia's universities—Melbourne, the Australian National University, the University of Queensland, Monash and Sydney—rank in the world top 100, with the University of Adelaide knocking on the door. Even on the Olympic medal table, Australia regularly ranks around 6th.

Australia's relative lack of confidence is most evident in the quality of its diplomacy, the last of Morgenthau's components of national power. As he writes:

Of all the factors which make for the power of a nation, the most important, and of the more unstable, is the quality of diplomacy. All the other factors which determine national power are, as it were, the raw materials out of which

⁸ Morgenthau, op. cit., pp80–105

⁹ Fullilove (2015), “Foreign policy begins at home”,
<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/6689510>

¹⁰ Morgenthau, p92

the power of a nation is fashioned. The quality of a nation's diplomacy combines those different factors into an integrated whole, gives them direction and weight, and awakens their slumbering potentialities by giving them the breadth of actual power.¹¹

Morgenthau's observation goes to the heart of Australia's reticence on the international stage: we simply do not invest enough intellectual and political energy into bringing together the components of national power to give them effect. The Lowy Institute has tracked the decline in Australia's diplomatic capacity, competence and footprint for almost two decades, most recently in the "Australia's Diplomatic Footprint" section of its 2019 pre-election summary on the two major parties' stances on various key issues.¹² This decline is a stark demonstration of our inability to create our own agency.

How Australia deals with its national power defines its strategic policy, its foreign policy, its defence and security policy, and its defence capability planning. It also affects how Australia displays and positions its defence capabilities—in other words, its force posture. It is therefore of critical importance that any decisions that might lead to a change in force posture be firmly grounded in a sophisticated appreciation of national power.

¹¹ Morgenthau, p105

¹² Oliver (2019) "Australia's Diplomatic Footprint", <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/australia-votes-2019/issues/australias-diplomatic-footprint/>

The national interest

To give effect to national power, and to create the agency to do so, there are four prerequisites: we need to know who we are (our national identity); we need to know and articulate what we stand for (our national values); we need to identify and articulate our national interests; and, as a subset of our national interests, we need to identify and articulate our strategic interests, which focus on the role of military power in asserting or defending national power.

IDENTITY

The Uluru “Statement from the Heart”,¹³ and the broad national conversation that has ensued, provides a palpable reminder that Australia has not yet settled its identity as a people or a nation. The issue is politically fraught, with some seeking to claim pre-eminence for the Anglo-Celtic tradition and its symbols of monarchy as the national unifying character, while others seek to preserve individual national and ethnic traditions as part of a broader multi-cultural national identity. The key to resolving Australia’s identity problem may well lie in the “Statement from the Heart”, where identity is less a brand signalling difference than it is an assertion of belonging signalling adherence. Were all Australians to acknowledge that together we belong as custodians and occupiers of this fabulous continent, with its geography, its geomorphology, its ecosystems and its ancient indigenous traditions, “who are we” would become a settled question.

VALUES

That acceptance would liberate the discussion of what we stand for as a nation, along with the values that unite us, drive our national policies, and provide the rallying points around which we preserve and protect our identity. Where “belonging” largely defines identity, values such as inclusion, trust, acceptance, respect and fairness both inform and energise our national agency. Because so few nations in the world have been able to settle questions of identity and values, Australia’s ability to do so would afford us the credibility, legitimacy and authority that are so critical in playing a constructive and effective role in world affairs.

¹³ Referendum Council (2017) “Uluru Statement from the Heart”, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/>

Resolving questions of identity and values would also render the task of articulating our national interests much more achievable. It is important, of course, to distinguish “the national interest”—a term often used to end discussion rather than to initiate or promote it—from “the national interests”.

National interests

“The national interest” is an ontological term that addresses the fundamental character of the nation: the metaphysical elements that, in combination, give the nation its coherence and ethos. The term captures both the energy that drives the national community and the glue that holds it together. So for anything to be “in the national interest”, it must affect the ability of the national community to act on its own account and to achieve the goals it and its leaders set for itself.

In the sixth edition of *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau defines “the national interest” in terms of power: “The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power”.¹⁴ Both power and identity, therefore, are intrinsic to the national interest.

If “the national interest” is ontological and substantive, “the national interests” are purposive: they articulate the goals the nation sets for itself both to protect and promote its place in the world. Happily for Australia, there is a considerable amount of convergence and consensus in the way that various national entities and leaders identify the national interests. Perhaps the briefest and clearest articulation was offered by the current Foreign Minister, Senator Penny Wong, in her 2017 address to the Lowy Institute:

These are the core interests that . . . underpin the framing and delivery of a Labor foreign policy.

- The security of the nation and its people.
- The economic prosperity of the nation and its people, enabled by frameworks that will allow Australia to take advantage of international economic opportunities.
- A stable, co-operative strategic system in our region anchored in the rule of law.
- Constructive internationalism supporting the continued development of an international rules-based order.

¹⁴ Morgenthau, p5

The realisation and advancement of these four core interests depend on our ability to harness the national power that gives substance to the national interest.¹⁵

At one level, with its references to international economic opportunities, a co-operative strategic system in our region and an international rules-based order, this speech may appear to be a prescription for diplomatic action. At a more fundamental level, however, it goes to the core issue that lies at the heart of the compact between government and the governed: security, as defined by the wellbeing of the community and the amenity that the community enjoys as its members live their lives as contented, fulfilled and prosperous people.

INTERESTS-BASED STRATEGIC PLANNING

National interests drive strategic policy, which ultimately concerns itself with the role of armed force in protecting and promoting the national interests. It follows that, to be authoritative and legitimate, strategic policy must be interests-based, capable of defending and advancing the national interests whenever they are constrained by the threat of armed force.

Moreover, long-term defence planning must be interests-based rather than threat-based, because interests endure while threats come and go. And when threats do appear, they constantly morph as they adjust to responses and changes in the geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic global order. It must also be remembered that armed force is only one of many forms of coercion. Strategic policy must therefore always be interests-based if it is to have the constancy in strategic direction that affords it the capacity, agility and flexibility to address military threat, regardless of whence and in what form it appears.

It has been Australia's practice, however, to pursue a threat-based approach to strategic policy making, whether the threat of direct military action is actual (and therefore identifiable) or contingent. So, for example, the opening sentence of the headline section of Paul Dibb's 1986 review of Australia's defence capabilities ("the Dibb review") stated: "Australia faces no identifiable direct military threat and there is every prospect that our favourable security circumstances will continue".¹⁶

¹⁵ Wong (2017) "Australia's national interests in a time of disruption", <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/speeches/australia-s-national-interests-in-a-time-of-disruption-lowy-institute-sydney-06-07-2017/>

¹⁶ Dibb (1986) *Review of Australia's defence capabilities: report for the Minister for Defence*, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2104854>

While the threat may have been so low in 1986 as to have been unidentifiable, in 2019 Dibb was writing, “Australia’s strategic outlook has continued to deteriorate and, for the first time since World War II, we face an increased prospect of threat from high-level military capabilities being introduced into our region”.¹⁷ By August 2022, Dibb was warning that Australia now faces “the probability of high-intensity conflict in our own strategic environment”, with “a certain country to our distant north”—i.e. China—the culprit.¹⁸

Setting aside the inter-related issues of exactly how high the “probability” of high-intensity conflict might be, whether our “strategic environment” extends so far to our distant north as to include China, and whether there is any evidence for postulating a Chinese intention to direct high-intensity armed force against Australia, it is important that Australia considers whether it is either practical or prudent to develop its strategic policy on the premise of a largely undifferentiated military threat from any specific country, whether that might be China or some other nation.

Furthermore, assertions that China is a military threat to Australia demand in-depth analysis if they are to be sustained as the principal focus of national strategic policy and the force posture that derives therefrom. It is clear that the militarisation of atolls and shoals in the South China Sea constitutes an aggressive extension of China’s force posture with respect to its immediate neighbours, in particular Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. But it does not constitute military expansionism. In a penetrating essay published in 2020, Kishore Mahbubani pointed out that China would have many arguments to deploy in order to make the case that it is not a militaristic power. Somewhat whimsically, Mahbubani notes:

Over the past two thousand years, China has often been the single strongest civilization in the Eurasian landmass. If China was inherently militaristic, it would have and should have conquered territories overseas, as the European powers did. Future historians will, for example, marvel at the fact that even though Australia is geographically close to China, it was physically occupied and conquered by far more distant British forces. Indeed, had James Cook sailed directly, it would have taken him at least 90 days to reach Australia’s Botany

¹⁷ Dibb (2019) “Planning to defend Australia in an era of profound strategic disruption”, Australia Strategic Policy Institute, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/planning-to-defend-australia-in-an-era-of-profound-strategic-disruption/>

¹⁸ Vincent (2022) “Defence expert Paul Dibb says Australia faces ‘probability of high-intensity conflict’ in the region”, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-05/defence-expert-paul-dibb-china-threat-australia-defence/101302104>

Bay, having departed from Plymouth Dockyard in August of 1768; counterfactually, were he instead to have sailed from China, he would have found himself ashore in Australia in just under 30 days.¹⁹

In a more recent essay, Professor Jocelyn Chey, a commentator with over 50 years' experience as a China expert, concluded that while China's domestic policies and practices would be completely unacceptable in a western democracy, and are accordingly regrettable, they do not "constitute a threat to Australia".²⁰

Were the putative threat from China to become the driving factor in Australia's strategic policy development, force structure planning and force posture disposition, the growing divergence between China's military capabilities and those of Australia would necessarily become a determining consideration in the allocation of resources for national defence in the annual budget. China has yet to reach the peak of its military power and strategic dominance of Asia,²¹ while Australia is, in relative terms, slipping down the regional military and strategic pecking order. Realism is the basis for all enduring planning, no less in the allocation of resources to defence than in bringing to account the opportunity costs that such allocations inevitably incur.

Finally, the notion that Australia could find itself in a force-on-force confrontation with China, even as an acolyte of the USA, which may pursue a war with China in pursuit of its own interests, is to beggar both reason and belief. Neither Australia nor China has any national interests that could draw them credibly in such a direction. Ultimately, while engaging in—and winning—wars might be important in some circumstances, this is not what strategy is about. Strategy, and the force posture that derives from it, is about preserving, protecting and advancing our national interests. To that end, a rigorous and sustained diplomacy is an absolute *sine qua non*, because, in the final analysis, national security is a matter of statecraft rather than an artefact of the military art.

Interests-based strategic planning—as practised by the United States, China, Russia, and the major powers of Europe—has proved elusive for Australia. The settler community's history of imperial solidarity and dependence on a great power for our

¹⁹ Mahbubani (2020) "Is China expansionist?", National Defense University Press, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2383310/is-china-expansionist/>

²⁰ Chey (2022) "The Defence Strategic Review: China is not a military threat", *Pearls and Irritations*, <https://johnmenadue.com/defence-strategic-review-china-is-not-a-military-threat/>

²¹ Mastro and Scissors (2022) "China hasn't reached the peak of its power", *Foreign Affairs*, [asnt-reached-peak-its-power?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=China%20Hasn't%20Reached%20the%20Peak%20of%20Its%20Power&utm_content=20220822&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/australia/2022/08/22/china-hasnt-reached-peak-its-power?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=China%20Hasn't%20Reached%20the%20Peak%20of%20Its%20Power&utm_content=20220822&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017)

material sustenance in, the first instance, and then for our security and our national confidence, has rendered us highly sensitive to threat. France, Russia, Japan, Indonesia and now China have all, at one time or another, been perceived as threats. (Of these, only Japan has been an actual threat.) So how might Australia's strategic planners devise an interests-based approach to long term planning as distinct from the more evanescent idea of threat?

The resolution to this problem is to be found in the Dobb Review itself: the realities of geography (geography being one of Morgenthau's elements of national power). The fact that the Dobb Review could not identify a contingent threat on which to construct a strategic planning paradigm forced it to reject "forward defence"—an expression of threat-based planning, and the basic strategic doctrine during the immediate post-WW2 decades—as an inadequate and misleading foundation on which to premise a strategic policy or to guide force development. The reasons for the inadequacy of forward defence then remain the same as the reasons for its inadequacy now. When cause and consequence are confused, confusion is the inevitable result.

The opening paragraphs of the Dobb Review set out this new thinking in lapidary terms.

Australia must have the military capacity to prevent any enemy from attacking us successfully in our sea and air approaches, gaining a foothold on our soil, or extracting political concessions from us through the use of military force ... Through a strategy based upon the fundamentals of our geographic location we can maximise the benefits of an essentially defensive posture in our region ... The exercise of authority over our land territory, territorial sea and air space is fundamental to our sovereignty and security. We must also be able to protect our resource zones and defend our maritime approaches ... A strong stable region free from external pressures is a fundamental security interest ... An important and recurring theme of the Review is the need to concentrate force structure priorities on our area of direct military interest ... The Review also recognises a sphere of primary strategic interest encompassing South East Asia and the South Pacific generally ... If Government wished, there would always be an option to make a modest military contribution in support of our more distant diplomatic interests and the military interests of others ... Our forces should not be specifically structured or equipped to undertake such tasks ... The practical benefits of the ANZUS relationship for our defence effort are recognised ... but there is no requirement for Australia to become involved in United States contingency planning for global war ... In defence terms, Indonesia is our most important neighbour ... This Review proposes a layered strategy of defence within our area of direct military interest. Our most important defence planning

concern is to ensure that an enemy would have substantial difficulty in crossing the sea and air gap.²²

This lengthy extract from the Dobb Review is important because it centres Australia's military planning—both in terms of force structure and of force posture—on the immutable nature of Australia's place on the globe. In placing geography at the centre of national strategic planning, the Review identifies Australia's area of direct military interest as extending 4,000 nautical miles from the Cocos Islands in the west to New Zealand and the Southwest Pacific in the east, and 3,000 nautical miles from the Indonesian archipelago south to the Southern Ocean. By any measure, that represents a huge strategic reach, extending far beyond that of any comparable country from either an economic or population perspective.

The Dobb Review proceeds to identify the key capability requirements that Australia needs if it is to meet the operational demands imposed upon it by its geography. Those requirements are immutable, remaining as current now as they were when the Review was released. Force posture, however, was beyond the Dobb Review's Terms of Reference.

²² Dobb (1986), op. cit, pp3–5

Making sense of force posture

In common usage, posture refers to comportment, physical attitude and physical behaviour as indicators of wellbeing, intent and/or status. Posture may indicate aggression or submission, relaxation or hyper-awareness, health or illness, confidence or insecurity. By constricting consideration of “force posture” to basing and activities that depend on physical assets and facilities for their employment, one disregards the fact that posture is intrinsic to the credibility of the nation’s defence capabilities. Without posture, defence capabilities are little more than an inventory of equipments that may provide options on which a government may draw when it wishes to attach a military force character to an action or intervention.

As a key element in national defence planning, force posture consists of at least eight distinguishable components: capability; disposition; location; regional defence connectivity; preparedness; readiness; sustainment and professionalism.

CAPABILITY

Taken together, the force elements necessary for an integrated and effective defence system provide the nation’s defence capability. Force posture is much more than the cupboard in which the various force elements are kept (i.e. where they are housed, located and based).

The availability of operating bases for force projection, especially close to theatres of conflict, certainly lends effect to defensive and offensive hardware. Yet as World War II demonstrated amply, force projection through forward basing can lead to dangerous hollowing-out of the rear, if that is where homeland defence is ultimately to be conducted.

Many, including Australian operational planners, take comfort from the fact that the US has somewhere around 750 forward military bases on every continent except Antarctica. However, as the US military historian and theorist Andrew Bacevich pointed out recently, militarized globalism has become increasingly unaffordable—and, moreover, it does not work:

Perhaps the moment has come to reconsider the taken-for-granted premises that have sustained U.S. national security policy since the immediate aftermath of World War II ... By gearing up to fight (however ineffectively) anywhere against any foe in any kind of conflict, it [the Pentagon] finds itself prepared to

fight nowhere in particular. Hence, the urge to extemporize on the fly, as has been the pattern in every conflict of ours since the Vietnam War.²³

If war against China is the focus of Australia's search for a contemporary force posture, bases in northern Australia will make little material difference to operations intended to deliver kinetic effects 4,000 kilometres away.

DISPOSITION

The disposition of force elements—i.e. how and where they are dispersed—is a critical consideration in the conduct of agile and flexible operations, including in the direct defence of Australia. To operate ADF force elements in the Indonesian archipelago, the Malayan peninsula, the Philippines or the South China Sea (to identify just a few locations that might be relevant to the direct defence of Australia in certain scenarios, as they were in the 1940s), Australia would need bilateral access and Status of Forces Agreements that impact directly on force posture. Coalition-building and bilateral access arrangements are an integral part of a sophisticated force posture that is responsive to the rapidly changing character of both the broad strategic environment and the more specific demands of joint and combined operations.

LOCATION

Location is the critical enabler for force disposition. As the 2012 Review argued conclusively, the location of major operating and support facilities is a core element in maintaining a credible force posture. The location and basing of the nation's defence capabilities and associated assets—for instance intelligence collection facilities, over-the-horizon radar (OTHR) collectors, command and control (C²) headquarters—demand careful consideration and planning, not simply for operational reasons, but to ensure their survivability should armed conflict occur. The availability of suitable civil infrastructure is a key consideration, since remote stand-alone bases create their own support and sustainment problems and overheads. To develop existing defence facilities in northern Australia and/or to construct new facilities only makes sense if done in conjunction with national infrastructure planning.

²³ Bacevich (2022) "Russia's underperforming military (and our own)", Counterpunch, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/09/15/russias-underperforming-military-and-our-own/>

REGIONAL DEFENCE CONNECTIVITY

Australian strategic planning has long recognised that sustained armed attacks on the Australian continent are most likely to be undertaken “from or through” the Indonesian archipelago. The mischievous expression “arc of instability”, designed to generate more fear than understanding, itself exploited a threat-based concept that focused on Indonesia as a potential threat to Australia. While Indonesia is still perfectly capable of being a substantial threat to itself, it lacks the motive, intent and capability to sustain a war of conquest against Australia—or, for that matter, to its neighbours.

Interests-based planning would identify the building of strong regional coalitions and partnerships as a key plank in Australia’s strategic platform. There is considerable natural strategic convergence both between Australia and its neighbours, and between our neighbours themselves. The idea of external interference is anathema in Southeast Asia, even if the often ambiguous and diffident approach taken by the ASEAN nations to changes in regional strategic circumstances differs from the more strident approach adopted in recent years by Australia.

Ensuring that Australia’s defence forces, and the force elements that give expression to Australia’s strategic policy, are able to operate with and within neighbouring countries is a major operational objective if Australia is to exploit two of its key natural strategic assets—space and time. These assets manifest as the distance and the logistic complexities an adversary would encounter in traversing thousands of kilometres while maintaining surprise.

A confident and effective force posture requires substantial regional defence connectivity. Australia needs access to regional defence facilities, just as we need to be able to sustain combined (and, hopefully, joint) operations with regional partners. Historically, Australia has operated successfully from bases in Thailand and south Vietnam, just as it maintained a permanent RAAF presence at RMAF Butterworth (Penang) for many years and continues to conduct rotational deployments to Malaysia in support of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

Of course, it is relatively straightforward to manage transit arrangements. What is contemplated here, however, is the more demanding and considerably more effective ability to sustain continuous operations in full collaboration with regional partners, which in turn requires the complex set of agreements, access protocols, support arrangements and exercises that create confidence, professionalism and, above all, trust. Without these qualities at both the national and regional levels, force posture lacks both resonance and reality.

PREPAREDNESS

For the posture of the ADF to provide the government with deployment options, the entire Defence infrastructure and its supporting systems need to maintain agreed levels of preparedness. As the Howard government found in 1999, preparedness is costly: it reallocated \$1 billion within the defence budget to bolster preparedness, without which the East Timor operation conducted in September that year would have been extremely difficult.

If the force elements are inoperable, whether due to training, personnel or logistics deficiencies, no amount spent on force posture will generate acceptable operating levels or provide government with the confidence that force deployment can achieve its goals. Australia's success in achieving the goals of peacekeeping and political stabilisation in East Timor was in large measure due to the foresight of the defence leadership in introducing broad-based enhancements in defence preparedness. Put simply, if force effects are not available, force posture investment feeds complacency rather than competence.

READINESS

Even in a force that maintains acceptable levels of preparedness, availability at short notice cannot always be guaranteed: important force posture considerations that affect readiness include the availability of operational or support personnel, maintenance states, access to consumables and the availability of key services from the civil sector (for instance, medical professionals to assist in cases of humanitarian relief). If preparedness requires considerable investment to maintain force elements at acceptable levels of availability, readiness is even more expensive. Short Notice to Move (NTM) maintains force elements on standby for emergency or other urgent deployments, and is in some ways the ultimate test of a responsive force posture.

SUSTAINMENT

It is one thing to deploy and locate a force, but altogether another to sustain it over the long term. Sustainment covers the entire gamut of factors that generate combat success—recruitment, training, retention, force acquisition, logistics and robust C² capabilities. It is, for that reason, a principal force posture consideration. As noted above, location near suitable civilian infrastructure is important if sustainment is to be both manageable and affordable. Force dispersal over a wide front is a risky approach to force posture if force elements are to be maintained as both usable and effective.

PROFESSIONALISM

Underpinning all aspects of defence force posture is the professionalism of the members of the ADF themselves, both those who command and lead the ADF and those who get the ships to sea, the aircraft in the air and the proverbial boots on the ground. People provide the brains, muscles and sinews of the national force posture, and for a force of modest size, such as Australia maintains, people are the ultimate force posture determinant. Their competence and morale together deliver the professionalism without which force effects are impossible. While some may wish to regard the professionalism of the ADF as a qualitative factor of marginal significance to force posture, the fact is that the professionalism of the national defence force in a stable and robust democracy is a principal determinant of national security. As Russia has so amply demonstrated in its adventure to Ukraine, force posture without professionalism is a prelude to defeat.

Force posture for what?

It is important to recall that, for over a century, Australia's force posture was largely predicated on expeditionary deployments. In other words, the nation's force posture was, in critical senses, determined by the force dispositions and force decisions of other nations. Operational bases situated across northern Australia are not of much use when the ADF is deployed to distant theatres in support of important strategic decisions that reflect alliance priorities rather than direct national defence priorities.

The evolving nature of alliances, especially Australia's alliance with the US, means that the durability and long-term utility of such alliances should be taken into account by any force posture review. Any in-depth analysis of the attractiveness, or otherwise, of US participation in defence infrastructure decisions premised on US forward deployment and/or US forward-basing must give priority to the preservation of independent decision-making and the retention of effective sovereignty in the employment of Australian defence force elements. It is easy to generate assumptions and expectations: it is difficult to dispel them after the event.

There may be circumstances in the future when Australia might rely on the physical presence of US force elements to support Australia in its direct defence. However, such circumstances do not exist at present, nor are they credible in the foreseeable future. Just as it would be naïve and misguided to base Australia's force posture on the probability of high-intensity conflict with China, so too it would be both premature and injudicious to factor in either forward-deployed US force elements to defend Australia or presumed Australian support for US force deployments to meet US strategic priorities elsewhere.

This is again a distinction between cause and consequence: while it would always be valuable for Australia to be able to conduct joint and combined operations with the US in exercising the force elements of both countries, that benefit is a consequence of good planning. To plan for joint and combined operations as a determinant of force posture decisions is, quite simply, to put the cart before the horse.

The fundamental premise on which all force posture decisions must be taken is the need for Australia to be able to act in its own direct defence in those credible circumstances in which armed force may be applied against us. To that end, we must exploit our natural defences, among which distance and terrain are principal assets. We must be able to constrain the ability of a potential adversary to operate its maritime forces freely in our maritime approaches, and to operate its land forces on

Australian territory. Unlike deterrence, force posture is not a function of bluff. Rather, it is a function of capability, availability, determination and high levels of military art. It is about aligning what is possible with what is credible. Force posture is about the how the force-in-being can be deployed and employed, not about where it can be deployed and employed.

As anyone in the kinetic arts or sports professions would recognise only too well, force posture is not about the gymnasium: rather, it is about what can be done in the gymnasium.

Conclusion

To guide Australia's future force posture and force structure, this review should reaffirm the basic task of any democratic government: to ensure that the nation has the means to defend itself against any credible attack against its territory or its people. It has long been a core principle in Australian strategic planning that the capabilities acquired for the direct defence of Australia will also provide our government with force options to assist other governments in meeting their defence needs, or to assist the UN in meeting the challenges of peace keeping and peace enforcement. The consequences of good policy, however, are not the determinants of good policy.

Australia's history of defence engagement over the past two decades, together with the emergence of disruptive activities by major international players such as China and Russia, have generated high levels of uncertainty in the Australian polity. This review has the opportunity to reduce levels of uncertainty while it enhances confidence in Australia's ability to act constructively on the international stage. Capabilities predicated on Australia's direct defence needs, together with a posture that supports regional engagement, will afford Australia a new and necessary capacity for influencing the direction of security affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. This would be a significant outcome of this review.