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Outgoing Australia?

Geoffrey Till

The Centre of Gravity series

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Outgoing Australia?

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Executive Summary

- ✦ Recent Australian Defence policy has suggested an ‘outgoing defence posture’ in Asia. This has faced criticism on grounds of national interest and capacity, though both concerns can be found wanting.
- ✦ As a middle power Australia will need to offer significant contributions to coalition actions to help resolve low and high end regional crises and ensure Australian interests are protected.
- ✦ Fears about transformational changes in the power of sea denial capabilities are not new and historically have tended to produce antidotes that restore the status quo.
- ✦ The future thrust of Australia’s policy is less a question of feasibility and much more one of perceived desirability.

Policy Recommendation

- ✦ To build the joint capabilities required for a truly outgoing maritime strategy by turning the aspiration for a 2 percent GDP defence spending level into reality.

Australia’s two recent Defence White Papers have continued the country’s strategic shift towards an outgoing defence posture within Asia, and a further shift away from its previous focus on a ‘near abroad’ comprising the waters to its immediate north and to the troubled island states of the South Pacific. Now, much of the policy discourse is on the challenges and the requirements of the ‘Indo-Pacific region’ and of Australia’s playing a more significant role in moulding its destiny. Hence, the country’s emphasis on even closer relations with the US (of which the Darwin decision is an especially good illustration), with India and Japan and with Indonesia not just as a significant factor in the control of illegal immigrants, but as a future determinant of strategic outcomes in Southeast Asia. Hence also, in terms of policy implementation, the Army’s new-found enthusiasm for a ‘maritime strategy’ and the Navy’s acquisition of *Hobart* class Air Warfare Destroyers (AWDs), *Canberra* class Amphibious Assault Ships (LHDs) and its aspirations for perhaps a dozen long-range submarines to succeed the Collins class.

But this new emphasis on Australia maintaining a more distant and potentially interventionist focus in the Indo-Pacific region is not without its critics. Criticisms fall into two categories. The first comprises doubts about whether such a posture is wise, still less necessary, especially if it is seen as code for national involvement in a policy of ‘containing’ a rising China. Others, on the basis of the West’s troubled interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the domestic political reaction to them — suggest that the age of interventionism is over. For evidence of this they point to the West’s recent reluctance to get sucked militarily into the troubles of Syria. International activism of this sort can certainly be portrayed as unwise, avoidable even counter-productive.

The second category of doubt is about the feasibility of such an outgoing policy. Some argue that Australia simply cannot afford the military means that such an ambitious policy focus would require. For them, the evident gap between what it needs and currently envisaged levels of defence spending suggest that successive governments have, whatever they may say, more or less accepted that limitation for the foreseeable future.¹ Still others point to the spread of sea-denial capabilities around the region and doubt whether intervention, or even a forwards posture, in all but the most benign of political environments is actually militarily feasible. Finally sceptics point to the extent of the challenge faced by Australia's maritime defence industry especially with a 'valley of death' opening up after the completion of the AWD and LHD programmes and before the start of any future submarine or frigate replacement project.

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the spectrum to state-on-state conflict at the other, higher intensity end. Many of these threats could disrupt the trade on which Australia's prosperity and security depend. Australians could of course stand on the sidelines wringing their hands while others decide their destiny. But any country that abnegates responsibilities to which it is seen as capable of contributing is especially likely to lose the capacity to influence outcomes. The dangers of such a policy are clear – most obviously the increased prospect of international outcomes less likely to be in Australia's interests.

Nor is such a pragmatic policy of considered activism at a distance from the homeland necessarily beyond Australia's capacities. In the first place, many of the most likely threats to the good order on which the international trading system depends are at the lower end of the spectrum – international maritime crime in its various forms, (the illicit trade in drugs, piracy, illegal fishing, environmental deterioration, people smuggling and so on) and disorder ashore. Such activities may impact on sea-based trade directly – and/or indirectly through imperiling the social and political stability ashore on which trade depends. For examples of that, we need look no further than places like Northern Mexico, West Africa and Somalia, where the effects of local disorder, unless contained by international action,

For all these reasons, such sceptics urge the reigning in of Australia's ambitions and a return to a focus on the defence of Australia's near abroad. Many of their arguments are weighty, not to be dismissed lightly and could well recur in still greater strength in the years to come. Nevertheless, they may be based on false premises; if so, it would be mistake for the country to retreat from its activist aspirations for those reasons. Instead this paper will argue that an outgoing maritime policy is both preferable, and for all its manifest challenges, possible.

The main reason for concluding that such a policy is indeed preferable derives from the simple fact that Australia is thoroughly enmeshed in a global sea-based trading system, not least as a major supplier of commodities to China. A threat to the system's operation represents an indirect threat to Australia's interests. Those threats range from international crime and natural disaster at the lower, least intense end of

could prove extremely serious. While none of these threats are easy to deal with (not least because they require wide and comprehensive responses not just military ones), joining in collaborative proactive and reactive responses, either by direct action or by sustained capacity-building is well within Australia's reach, as its recent activities in East Timor and the South Pacific clearly show.

On the other hand, the prospect of responding to inter-state conflict in the Indo-Pacific Region, even ones in which Australia is not directly and immediately involved, are clearly the worst of all possible threats to the system. Almost inevitably they would impact on trade. The effects on the market of a limited conflict between China and Japan over the islands of the East China Sea, or of a confrontation between China and the US over Taiwan could be potentially devastating. Concluding that for this reason such conflicts

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will not happen² assumes first that governments are in control of events, and not the other way around, and second that economic rationality is the main if not only driving force of human behavior – a debatable assumption even now in the wake of recent events in Yugoslavia, Iraq or Afghanistan, but especially in the worst of future times when many suspect that global demand for energy, food and water resources will begin to outstrip supply.

Deterring or at least containing such high-end conflicts is the primary duty of the region's armed forces, and is likely to be the most demanding in terms of required military capability. Here the essentially collaborative and contributory nature of Australia's likely role is key. In such demanding circumstances, Australia is most unlikely to be acting on its own; instead it will most probably be part of some kind of coalition or partnership with others. In all probability for the immediate future, a partnership in which the United States will be acting essentially at least as what NATO calls a 'framework nation.'³ Australia's assessment of its national stake in any such situation will doubtless shape its choice in what and how much to contribute. An effective contributory strategy, however, will tend to be based on the ability to offer substantial capabilities, niche or otherwise, and significant experience in multinational military interoperability. The expense required to develop these capabilities can therefore be regarded as a form of investment in the capacity to influence outcomes in a coalition setting. Putting it crudely, the more Australia brings to the table, the more it is likely to be able to take away from it at the end. It is hard to define exactly what 'more' means because both inputs and outputs are so scenario-dependent. In high-end situations, high end military capacities, whether kinetic or supporting and a willingness to share risk with partners is clearly likely to be important. In low-end situations with less at stake, the requirements are likely to be proportionately lower.

But one major source of concern remains, namely the view that high-end forward-leaning activism in the Indo-Pacific Region is anyway likely to be increasingly hazardous given the spread of anti-access/area denial capabilities in the shape of coastal submarines, mines, land based missiles of various sorts, modern aircraft and fast attack craft. The deterrent effect of these may be reinforced politically by the fact that the indirect nature of the threats that justify such activities means that the response will be 'discretionary' – essentially a matter of choice. In such 'wars of choice', risks, costs and especially losses are particularly sensitive domestically. Moreover what some see as the growing 'territorialisation' of the sea and increased pressure on traditional concepts of freedom of navigation add legal concerns to this toxic deterrent mix as well.

These are undoubtedly serious concerns, but there are a number of off-setting arguments. In the first place, such concerns largely relate to high-end and generally exceptional situations in which militarily capable adversaries offer serious and credible resistance to such international activism. These are, happily, not common occurrences and the aim must be to keep them so. Second, medium and smaller powers can take some comfort from the protective capacities of the US as both a default partner and for the time being at least the dominant military power in the region.

Third, historically, transformational rises in the power of sea denial capabilities relative to sea control ones are not a novel phenomenon. They occurred in dramatic form with the advent of the torpedo boat in the 19th Century, with the rise of land-based airpower and in the first and second ages of the submarine. In none of these earlier examples did reality conform to the expectations of the wilder-eyed proponents of such technologies. This does at least raise a degree of legitimate doubt about the claim that things really *will* be different this time. The development of countervailing sea control capabilities such as those being explored most dramatically but far from exclusively in the US 'Air-Sea battle' construct may well conform to a historic pattern in which the technology that produces a problem will

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of a great deal of assistance, especially from Europe. There does not seem to be any structural reason why the country should not prove capable of growing the defence industry it needs, over time. Since as a general rule, it is cheaper (certainly in the short-term) to 'acquire and adapt' from foreign sources than to build locally, the relative cost-effectiveness of foreign acquisition should also probably be built into assessments of the extent of that need.⁴

The issue of enhanced defence spending to accommodate all this, on the other hand, is more problematic since successive governments have felt unable to deliver promised increases. Nor is it clear why things should be any different this time. The result has been a degree of systemic under-funding and of some 'hollowing out' especially in the support and sustainment areas.

But this is a matter of political choice, not economic necessity – of recognising the need to prioritise defence against health, social welfare, education and infrastructure. Countries are capable of surviving, even prospering, while spending much more than the 2 percent of GDP on defence Australia now aspires to at some indeterminate future date, as both United States and Singapore currently demonstrate. Indeed the UK devoted something like half its GDP to the war effort during the Second World War without incurring social revolution or an irredeemably ruined economy and still managed to enjoy a 1950s decade when they 'never had it so good.' The future thrust of Australia's policy then is less a question of feasibility and much more one of perceived desirability. Only if the arguments for an outgoing maritime policy presented above are politically accepted, will the necessary political and financial investment prove forthcoming.

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sooner or later produce an antidote which leaves things pretty much where they were. Even so, the possibility of significant change in the defensive/offensive balance does deserve to be taken seriously, not least because of the enormous consequences for the established ways of doing things at sea should, this time, it turn out to be true. At the very least, the capacity to withstand the sea denial capabilities of possible adversaries and a professional determination, even so, for ships to be capable of going into 'harm's way' and doing their business is more likely to increase costs rather than reduce them.

With that we return to the key issue of affordability and industrial feasibility. In theory at least, the latter may prove more amenable to improvement than the former. Australia's defence industry has in recent years learned a lot through the conduct of recent procurement programmes, not least with the Collins submarines, about the development of new skill-sets and the need for discipline and stability in the management of such large projects. It is, moreover, in receipt

of a great deal of assistance, especially from Europe. There does not seem to be any structural reason why the country should not prove capable of growing the defence industry it needs, over time. Since as a general rule, it is cheaper (certainly in the short-term) to 'acquire and adapt' from foreign sources than to build locally, the relative cost-effectiveness of foreign acquisition should also probably be built into assessments of the extent of that need.⁴

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It is tempting to conclude, therefore, that this will depend, above all, on how things turn out internationally and that in the last analysis the international context will prove the key driver of strategic choice. On emerging answers to such questions as whether the Indo-Pacific will turn out to be as peaceful as the name suggests, whether China is the benign hegemon that it promises to be, whether terrorism and transnational crime turn out to be containable will Australia's future policy depend.

The problem with 'waiting on shore for the breeze' is that it is essentially reactive and not a policy that helps shape the environment. Further, there might well be a worrying time gap between recognising an emerging problem and responding to it. Accordingly there is much to be said for a national policy of intelligent anticipation. In this inalienable policy

constants like Australia's geographic position, its reliance on sea-borne trade, the fact that many of the threats that confront it are less local than regional, even global, the enduring nature of its relationship with the United States, and the expectations of its partners in the region and beyond it, all suggest that a move forwards (helping to build security within the Indo-Pacific rather than try to defend Australia from it, as the Defence White paper of 2013 said), is indeed, for all its costs and challenges, the way to go.

Policy Recommendation

- ✦ To build the joint capabilities required for a truly outgoing maritime strategy by turning the aspiration for a 2 percent GDP defence spending level into reality.

Endnotes

- 1 See James Brown, 'Fixing Australia's Incredible Defence Policy' *Lowy Institute Analysis*, October 2013.
- 2 Thus Hugh White, 'Fears over freedom of navigation are overblown' *The Straits Times*, 16 Oct 2013.
- 3 That is one that by common consent acts as the Chairman of the Board, establishing but not necessarily determining the agenda
- 4 Nigel Pittaway, 'Skilled Labor Shortages Plagues Australian Shipyards' *Defensenews*, 12 Nov 2012.



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