

Spruiking a China threat is foolish

Australia's defence white paper has, rightly, caused resentment in Beijing, writes **Ross Cottrill**.

At the start of the last century, US president Theodore Roosevelt suggested America should "speak softly and carry a big stick". The US was a major power in its hemisphere and had taken on and defeated one of the old European empires, Spain, taking Cuba and the Philippines as prizes.

Australia is not on such a course, but the defence white paper 2009 is a reminder that we could still learn from Roosevelt.

The Defence Force has for years supported peace in East Timor, and promoted law and order in Solomon Islands and elsewhere in a low-key and effective way.

We do not look and sound much like our Asian neighbours, but we seek to be included in their community life because we have major and growing interests there. Yet sometimes our commentary, driven by the element of spin in our political culture, is not so soft.

In the case of the messages conveyed by the defence white paper, there have been complaints from China. And a leading specialist has even suggested the paper might have contributed to Chinese aggressive behaviour regarding the resources industry.

The arrest of Rio Tinto executive Stern Hu was an expression of displeasure, says Cheng Li, a professor and director of research at the Washington-based John L Thornton China Centre – and the white paper was one source of that discontent.

What have we said to upset opinion leaders in our largest trading partner, a nation with a long imperial tradition, a population of 1.3 billion and nuclear weapons? The main issue is the suggestion there is a "China threat" that lies



In deep water . . . the Australian Defence Force's rationale for a planned navy build-up has raised concerns.

Photo: REUTERS

behind our government's decision to shift the emphasis of defence development towards naval forces.

"China definitely will not accept Australia adopting the so-called China threat thesis," one Chinese report declared.

Our ambassador to China was obliged to clarify our position. As respectfully reported in the official *People's Daily*, he said the white paper addressed a broad range of possible scenarios in the region, that it was not about any particular nation or source of threat, and that it was simplistic to talk of a China threat. He said Australia, with its "massive" coastline, needed to shift the emphasis more towards naval forces.

Unfortunately, the white paper puts it differently. It acknowledges China has a significant opportunity as a stakeholder in the development and stability of the global economic and political system. But it also, disappointingly, canvasses the possibility of conflict with Asia's largest power. This strange insouciance should not have been allowed to stand.

Tensions about Taiwan are not a new issue and are a significant preoccupation for our partners in North-East Asia, particularly Japan and Korea. The possibility of our involvement would arise from our alliance with the US. In the early Bush years we were told we could not expect to have an alliance with the US *à la carte*, implying that if the US felt a need to be involved we, too, would be expected to be involved.

In time, the US developed its position to one opposing any attempt to alter by force the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. This position aligns with Australian interests in regional security and maintenance of a One China policy.

The white paper, however, seems to overlook the best thinking on these issues. There are good reasons for advocating a substantial boost in naval power without resort to a China threat: We are a maritime nation, with a huge coastline and substantial maritime resource zones. And we have an open economy deriving vast benefits from international trade, particularly

with the large economies of North Asia – Japan, Korea and China.

A second line of argument relates to our desire, as expressed in the white paper, to develop "greater strategic influence beyond our immediate neighbourhood". Developing the high-end naval capabilities suggested in the paper would make us more attractive security partners.

Casting China in a negative light is not essential to such an extension of Australian influence.

To the extent that China has now, and is likely to have, rather more strategic influence and diplomatic leverage in North-East Asia than Australia, this approach could be – perhaps already has been – counterproductive even to maintaining such influence as we have.

■ *Ross Cottrill is visiting fellow at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, ANU. This is an extract of a series exploring Australia's engagement with Asia. The full version is on www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au*