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TALKING TOUGH

Defence White Paper 2009

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At the start of last century President Theodore Roosevelt suggested America should: “speak softly and carry a big stick”. The US was already a major power in its own hemisphere and had recently, under his leadership, taken on and defeated one of the old European Empires, Spain, taking Cuba and the Philippines as prizes. The US was well on its way to wider recognition as a Great Power.

Australia is not on such a course, but the Defence White Paper 2009, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, is a reminder that we could still learn from Teddy Roosevelt.

Apart from the high profile activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, our Defence Force has been engaged for years in supporting peace in East Timor, promoting law and order in the Solomons Islands, and elsewhere in the South Pacific in a low-key and effective way. But sometimes our commentary, driven by the element of spin in our political culture is not so soft.

After the Bali bombings in 2002, when Australia was seeking to prevent any recurrence of that incident, the then Prime Minister was asked whether the Government would be prepared to take pre-emptive action against a foreign country where a terrorist threat against Australia was not being addressed. John Howard responded that yes, his Government would be prepared to take such action.

There was criticism in Southeast Asia from countries whose co-operation we needed in the campaign against extremist terrorists. Eventually explanations were made which reduced the significance of the position taken to little more than a reflexive attempt to achieve more complete alignment with policies of the Bush Administration in its Global War on Terrorism. Apparently we had been less concerned with how our neighbours would see such a position; we could explain to them later and remove implications of our readiness to act militarily against any of them.

Our intervention in East Timor is regarded as a major success within Australia. We felt obliged to bring an end to the abuses perpetrated by the 'militias' and play a leading role in assisting East Timor to achieve independence. Yet the triumphalist rhetoric of our politicians, celebrating our latest feat of arms, led to questioning in the region of Australia's motives and methods. Most of our neighbours welcomed East Timor's independence but were glad to see Australia hand over command of the intervention force as soon as it could be negotiated.

These episodes would not matter much if we were a super-power, or a beleaguered and ostracised nation. In fact we are a relatively small country, with a developed economy. 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.

In the case of the messages conveyed by the latest Defence White Paper, there have been complaints from China, and a leading specialist on China has suggested that the paper may have contributed to recent Chinese aggressive behaviour regarding the resources industry. 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 point at issue is the suggestion that there is a 'China threat' which lies behind our Government's decision to shift the emphasis of our defence development in the future toward naval forces.

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

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Australia's Ambassador to China was obliged to clarify our position. As respectfully reported in the official *People's Daily*, he said that the White Paper addressed a broad range of possible scenarios in the Asia-Pacific region, that it is not about any particular nation or source of threat, and that it is simplistic to talk of a China threat. He said that Australia, with its "massive" coastline needed to shift the emphasis of its force development more toward naval forces. He also spoke of the strength and momentum in the development of our relations.

Unfortunately, the White Paper put it differently. It noted in the section, 'Australia's Strategic Outlook', the importance to Australia of the strategic primacy of the United States, but it was not sure where to go from there. It sees US primacy as giving way to "an increasingly multipolar order". Any future contraction of US strategic interests in the region would adversely affect Australian interests, regional security and global security. But then not wanting to write off the US in Asia and the Pacific – surely a rash assumption – it pulls back noting: "Even so, the United States has large interests in remaining strategically engaged in the Asia-Pacific region". It is a crucial point for Australia's future security yet there is no attempt to balance or refine these apparently conflicting views.

The same Chapter refers to "likely tensions between the major powers of the region" and "the primacy of the United States [as being] increasingly tested". It goes on to speak of 'The Strategic Implications of the Rise of China', noting – and it is worth quoting a passage here as an example of key strategic and force structure judgments in the Paper which need to be questioned:

The Paper acknowledges that China has a significant opportunity to take its place as a stakeholder in the development and stability of the global economic and political system. But the strange insouciance with which it purports to canvas the possibility of conflict with Asia's largest power, and our largest trading partner, should not have been allowed to stand.

The crucial relationship in the region, but also globally, will be that between the United States and China. The management of the relationship between Washington and Beijing will be of paramount importance for strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Taiwan will remain a source of potential strategic miscalculation, and all parties will need to work to ensure that developments in relation to Taiwan over the years ahead are peaceful ones. The Government reaffirms Australia's longstanding 'One China' policy.

The last sentence appears to be an afterthought, but it would support Beijing's view that its dealings with Taiwan are internal matters and there is no scope for a direct military role by Australia.

The Paper acknowledges that China has a significant opportunity in the decades ahead to take its place as a stakeholder in the development and stability of the global economic and political system. But the strange insouciance with which it purports to canvas the possibility of conflict with Asia's largest power, and our largest trading partner, should not have been allowed to stand.

Such handling of China, for instance, provoked comment from the Australian Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull. He said it "seems to be based upon the anticipation of a major conflict with China – something most people would regard as being very unlikely and not realistic in the context of Australia's future relations and future strategy in the Asia-Pacific".

There are good reasons for advocating a substantial boost in naval power... There are the considerations alluded to by our Ambassador to China, deriving from our strategic geography: We are a maritime nation, with a huge coastline and substantial maritime resource zones.

In the months leading up to finalisation of the White Paper, there were reports of dissent from the intelligence community over the treatment of China. It seems that the final and approved version sought to preserve a tale of two Chinas – a good and a bad one, in which China was acknowledged for the positives in its current regional role, as well as cast as a potential threat.

Tensions over Taiwan are not a new issue in the security of the region, and are a significant preoccupation for our partners in Northeast Asia, particularly Japan and Korea. Australia itself does not have any commitment to the security of Taiwan. The possibility of our involvement would arise from our alliance with the US, which has made commitments in relation to Taiwan. In the early years of the Bush Administration we were told that we could not expect to have an alliance with the US *a 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 the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait by force. This position aligns with Australian interests in regional security, and maintenance of our ‘One China’ policy. Indeed some four years ago, under a different Government, when Australia had rejected an invitation from the US to participate in secret talks about China, the sensible view was put publicly by the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, that our experience showed that we did not have to choose between our partners, and that, if Australia ever had to choose between China and the US, then our policy would already have failed.

This begs the question as to why the White Paper seems to overlook the best thinking on these issues and baldly refers to the issue as contributing to its view of a potential threat from China.

Was it necessary to present this partly confused and partly offensive analysis of China? There are good reasons for advocating a substantial boost in naval power, without resort to a China threat. There are the considerations alluded to by our Ambassador to China, deriving from our strategic geography: We are a maritime nation, with a huge coastline and substantial maritime resource zones. We could also add the implications arising from our major interest in the security of the maritime resource zones adjacent to our coasts. And, fundamentally, 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 supporting expansion of naval capability relates to our desire, as expressed in the White Paper, to develop “greater strategic influence beyond our immediate neighborhood”. Developing capabilities seen as relevant to some contingencies in Northeast Asia would make us more attractive security partners for nations in that area and the US. The high-end naval capabilities suggested in the Paper, going some way beyond what might be required for defence in our own neighborhood, would be suitable for the purposes of developing such influence. There are questions, of course, as to how much priority we should give to such objectives, what are the opportunity costs both for defence and for other areas of national need, whether our actions in moving in this direction would be likely to be misinterpreted, and whether, having developed such capabilities, some future government might be drawn into employing them beyond the requirements of our own national security interests. What is clear, however, is that casting China in a negative light is not essential to the pursuit of such an extension of Australian influence. On the contrary,

to the extent that China has now and is likely to have in the future, rather more strategic influence and diplomatic leverage in Northeast Asia than Australia, this approach could be counter-productive even to maintaining such influence as we have.

In the case of Southeast Asia, the White Paper might have taken the opportunity to send some positive messages. There are the usual references to a secure and stable Southeast Asia as being in Australia's strategic interest as well as to Indonesia's having made remarkable gains in the past decade. It is noted as well that "a weak, fragmented Indonesia" would potentially be a source of threat to our own security and to Indonesia's other neighbours, while "an authoritarian or overly nationalistic regime in Jakarta would also create strategic risks for its neighbours".

Although a whole Chapter is devoted to treatment of our on-going 'Alliances and International Defence Relationships', it is generally descriptive. There is little of the breadth or depth of policy guidance expected in a White Paper, which should take the highest level viewpoint of the security of the nation, survey its broad strategic prospects, identify its most important strategic interests and argue for levels of defence effort, and directions for that effort, which will adequately support its interests. The current White Paper might have offered something new, for example, on promoting the security interests we share with Indonesia and our other neighbours in Southeast Asia. Indeed if it had not been for an inadvertent disclosure in Parliament we would not have known that the Australian Government had in mind attempting to negotiate a new security arrangement with Indonesia.

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Much has been said publicly about the problems of funding the capacity building anticipated in the White Paper. What I am concerned about, however, is that – particularly in its handling of China – the Paper does not advance a rigorously logical argument in terms of our national strategic circumstances. More importantly, perhaps, it did not need to. In the months leading up to the effort to draft the Paper, the Government made it clear that it was seeking to announce a significant boost to defence, and that it believed that a shift toward a substantially increased naval force was necessary.

The White Paper is on strong ground in stressing the requirement for modernisation and what it calls 'remediation' (filling gaps) in the Defence Force. Naval expansion and other new proposals need more convincing rationales along the lines I have mentioned. If those were furnished, and briefly, then expansion could be welcomed as an aspect of the Government's wider nation-building agenda. This could still appeal to the defence community, predominantly the serving and retired military, the defence contractors and consultants, who naturally take to discussion of who stands to gain what. As a statement of 'vision' for defence capabilities to 2030, such a shortened White Paper would still have positioned the Government to claim the political high ground, setting the standard by which its successors could be judged for decades. In a political competition where the Liberal Party regards national security along with economic management as its two natural strong suits, it would leave the Opposition to be seen as carping over practicalities. However, because of its length – 141 pages – the White Paper we have is unlikely to be widely read, while the commentary on China has simply promoted unnecessary controversy and upset.

Finally, a suggestion: In view of the appointment of a new Ministerial team in Defence, the scale of the reforms planned, the extent to which the future development program is dependent on those reforms, and the uncertainties about the content and affordability of the program, it would be useful to revive the practice of having an annual Ministerial Statement to Parliament on the defence program as a whole. It would clarify for Australians what the Government's position is on defence development. It would improve transparency, including to our defence partners, and thus contribute to regional security. It should be only a fraction of the length of the White Paper. It should focus on the next five years, with some foreshadowing of prospects out to ten years. It should be a document designed to speak softly to our neighbours.

