

The Abuses of Realism and Australian Security Interests: the 2007 Defence Update

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Introduction

Richard Tanter from the Nautilus Institute at RMIT writes that

"the Australian Defence Update 2007 comes after a decade of constant and still unfinished increases in defence spending, a tripling of domestic security spending, huge weapons systems orders, Australian defence Forces deployments from Lebanon to the Solomon Islands, three large and extremely demanding deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor, and world politics turning on the hinge of a massive strategic miscalculation by Australias closest ally. Tanter argues that the Defence Update is a deeply flawed policy document, shaped by double standards and selective learning, shortsightedness and a botched use of realism, the aggressive demands of alliance maintenance, and an almost complete failure to consider the real and salient threats to Australian security - both the state- and human- versions - of global problems such as climate change, health and poverty."

The Abuses of Realism and Australian security interests: the 2007 Defence Update

“How we defend our sovereignty, our citizens and our interests – and our success in doing so – shapes the future of our nation.”

The opening words of Brendan Nelson’s Preface to the 2007 Defence Update [1] are the most accurate of all those in this seriously flawed document – though quite likely not as Nelson had in mind when he wrote them. The Defence Update 2007 comes after a decade of constant and still unfinished increases in defence spending, a tripling of domestic security spending, huge weapons systems orders, Australian Defence Force deployments from Lebanon to the Solomon Islands, three large and extremely demanding deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor, and world politics turning on the hinge of a massive strategic miscalculation by Australia’s closest ally. The Defence Update is a deeply flawed policy document, shaped by double standards and selective learning, shortsightedness and botched use of realism, the aggressive demands of alliance maintenance, and an almost complete failure to consider the real and salient threats to Australian security – both the state- and human- versions – of global problems such as climate change, health and poverty.

1. Product warning

Defence White Papers, and their little cousins, the Defence Updates, are curious documents. They should probably come with a product warning label which says something like:

“The Defence Update represents current Australian government defence policy and its strategic perceptions of the world. However, this document also contains words not meant to be taken at face value, except when they should be.”

Invisible product warnings aside, White Papers and Updates are meant to be taken seriously – as a basis for planning within government; as an explanation of the rationale for government policy to the citizenry, especially in the absence of parliamentary sovereignty; and as a signal of intent to other governments, both friendly and otherwise. The problem for the government lies in indicating to the separate stakeholder/readers just how the document is to be read: when it should be taken literally, when it should be ignored, and when it should be read through a set of codes which can be publicly understood – at least by those at whom they are aimed – but if necessary, publicly denied. Brendan Nelson’s visit to Beijing to explain to China how they should read beyond the words on the page faced exactly this problem. Whatever Mr Nelson said to the Chinese will also have to be squared with a much more important stakeholder: Washington.

2. The jargon of national interests

The Defence Update 2007 follows its predecessors in 2003 [2] and 2005 [3], which in turn reflected changes in policy and strategic environment since the last Defence White Paper [4] in 2000. The purpose of the Update and the rationale for its preparation are clearly explained:

“the Government has carefully assessed our national interests and how we might best use our armed forces in pursuit of those interests.”

The core stated goal of defence policy is the pursuit of Australia's "national interests". Indeed in the brief space of 64 pages of generously spaced text and photographs (perhaps 15,000 words all told), the word "interests" appears 42 times. The interests concerned are Australia's, as in "Australian national interests", or very occasionally, those of Australia's allies. No other conceptual term appears so often, or is used so freely, or with so little definition or conceptual traction.

There is, of course, a long history of concerns about the whole idea of national interests as a guide to policy, which at the very least includes concerns such as:

- how do we know what the national interest is?
- who decides what the national interest is (beyond the claims of a government)?
- how is "the nation" defined?
- how are moral concerns and interests derived from the requirements of power politics to be reconciled?
- how are the global human interest and the moral obligations of our shared humanity to be addressed within a national framework of democratic politics?

None of these issues are addressed in the Defence Update, and it is unreasonable to expect Defence planners to be preoccupied with questions of political philosophy. On the other hand, none of these issues are irrelevant to our current security concerns, and some of them, especially those driven by global concerns are highly salient, and it is reasonable to expect some reflection in policy.

But the lack of clarity and traction in the use of interests in this document as a guide to policy comes from at least three immediately salient sources visible in the Update:

- double standards and selective learning;
- shortsightedness and botched use of realism; and
- the demands of alliance maintenance.

3. Double standards and selective learning

To speak of double standards in security affairs is to immediately invite suspicion that you are not serious about policy. The world of international politics, it is argued, is the realm of power, and policy formation for the national interest is a matter of seeking purchase in an anarchic world. In polite circles, we all understand that our friends and allies have failings best not mentioned. At worst, international politics is unfortunately the realm of "reasons of state" - as Bakunin rightly remarked and Chomsky reminds us, the most frightening term in our political lexicon.

The unwritten product warning that comes with White Papers and their like cues readers to accept such double standards, and to pass over them in sophisticated silence. Yet while consistency is certainly an overrated political virtue, there are some limits to the value of a blind eye in global politics. This is especially so when there are signs that those in power can no longer distinguish on the one hand between the little lies that make close company possible, and violent and genuinely threatening reality on the other. Moreover, as even the Update concedes, we do live in a world where elements of moral community exist beyond the nation-state, and have a call on national policy. The capacity to execute policy in a democracy effectively is weakened by the combination of too facile a blind eye in the face of genuinely threatening real developments, and by the corrosive effects on legitimacy (a key element of "soft power") of a knowing and obvious partiality masquerading as

the application of universal values. Both factors are evident in the double standards and selective learning that undermine the interpretation of Australian interests offered in the Update as the basis of policy.

Double standards on core issues abound. The primary worry about WMD technology today is “the proliferation of such weapons by countries like North Korea and Iran”. Nuclear proliferation in our region by India, Pakistan or, further afield, by Israel, is apparently not a concern. In East Asia, Australia supports “Japan’s more active security posture within the US alliance and multinational coalitions”. However Chinese military modernization “could create misunderstandings and instability in the region”. Just in case the Chinese failed to get the message, the China-based concern about possible “misunderstandings and instability”, is reinforced on the same page with a warning about the dangers of “strategic miscalculation” - echoing the same phrase apropos China barely a page earlier.

By contrast, the United States is several times depicted as “a stabilizing force”, despite its own rapid military transformation and increased military budget. The more salient and important example of “strategic miscalculation” is unmentioned and unmentionable: the American “miscalculation” in Iraq and Afghanistan - the hinge on which world politics is currently turning, catastrophically for the US and its close allies. The Defence Update’s authors know the reality, but in this context can say nothing of their fears.

The Australian double standard on nuclear weapons in the Middle East is evident - and salient - to any informed Indonesian or Malaysian. Such readers might be surprised by the lofty heights of the Update’s statement of government intent on nuclear weapons proliferation:

“Australia has an over-riding interest to prevent the spread of WMD by backing arms control agreements and applying active counter-measures with our allies - such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) - where proliferation is discovered.”

DFAT’s rump disarmament section is the carrier of the institutional memory of the department’s activist non-proliferation period under Gareth Evans responding to large-scale mobilized peace movement pressure. But generally welcome though the concept of the PSI is, its execution and legal premises are flawed. Moreover, Australia in the last decade has a less than stellar record on nuclear proliferation and arms-control initiatives - witness the current convolutions on uranium exports to India, as Canberra waits for the US to resolve its position on NPT renegades.

Drawing lessons from recent events in world affairs is a useful rhetorical trope for the Update, but the lessons “learned” are somewhat selective. For example:

“The increased capability of terrorists and insurgents against a well-armed nation was illustrated during the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006.”

There were any number of other lessons that could have been “learned” from that conflict, most of them highly relevant to current Australian policy. Most important among these was the extraordinary destructiveness of the practice of conventional warfare in urban environments by “a well-armed nation”, the now well-recognized limitations on the political effectiveness of using military force in such a manner, and the huge international cost in legitimacy to the “well-armed” state seen using such disproportionate and indiscriminate force.

4. Botched realism and the calculation of national interests

At the heart of Australian policy, especially under Howard, are the claims of realism: this is the way world is, and we can responsibly do no other. Leaving aside long-standing arguments about the constitutional failings of realism, what is most evident about the strategic picture portrayed in the latest Defence Update is that its realism is wanting – often at the moments when it presents itself as most compelling.

This is most evident in the discussion of at least three of the four clear innovations in security policy under the Howard government: the attempt to overthrow the defence of Australia doctrine, the movement to military alliances with Japan, India and Indonesia in concert with the US against China, and the deployment of Middle East expeditionary forces. All three of these initiatives, coupled with the wider US-led Global war on Terror, have driven the massive expansion of the military and intelligence budgets over the past decade.

Australian interests and the Middle East

In its piling up of Australian “interests”, one of the places where the Update comes close to spelling out what those interests might be is the Middle East, though it does not actually do so. What the Update does is assert that given “the continuing importance of the region to our security and broader national interests”, there three reasons to “expect Australia’s strategic involvement in the Middle East to continue”:

- the US will continue to “remain heavily engaged” in the region, because to withdraw “would undermine its own security”;
- the strategic interests of China, India and our “trading partners” are increasingly linked to the Middle East; and
- “extremist terrorism continues to draw funding, support and people from the Middle East”.

In trying to convince a doubtful public that there is a good reason for Australian troops to be involved in two Middle Eastern wars at one time, the Update authors were clearly labouring under several difficulties.

The first is the elephant in the room problem: the obvious and undoubted perceived interest – a perceived benefit to Australia from western access to oil – cannot be mentioned in polite company. When the Minister for Defence launched the Update with a general reference to the importance of energy security in the region, he was pilloried by the media and the political opposition, and then disowned by his leader and party. No, said the Treasurer, “Australian soldiers don’t risk their lives for petrol prices.” What the entire affair elided, and which is almost never discussed in parliament, the media, or by the commentariat, was the deep, unchanging and destructive character of the western concern to control Middle Eastern energy sources.

The second problem is that even when the dirty secret is admitted, if only in conclaves of trusted experts, it is soon clear that it is not at all certain that the security of the Australian people can be shown to be affected by who owns the oil fields of Iraq. Even at the height of its revolutionary zeal, Iran, the regime most hostile to the US and its allies, did not interrupt the exchange of oil for dollars. Indeed the architect of the only serious assault on unfettered western access to cheap oil in the OPEC years was the closest US ally, Saudi Arabia.

Accordingly, the Update authors chose to speak of Australia’s interests by indirection, rationalising predicted behaviour rather than addressing national interests. But perhaps predictably, the three

proffered bases for their expectation of continuing Australian involvement in the Middle East were limp and unconvincing, failing elementary tests of realism:

- even assuming, in the face of withdrawal from Iraq sooner rather than later, the US will continue to be “heavily engaged” in the Middle East, the question of why that means Australia will be militarily involved is left unsaid. This is probably as it has to be, since the only logical answers are either that it is assumed that American and Australian interests are identical, which is simply not true, or that Australia follows US geo-political direction, which is close enough to the truth.
- the interests of our trading partners are indeed connected to the Middle East, but it is not at all automatic that this fact then dictates an Australian military presence in the region. Certainly, not to China, our largest trading partner.
- “extremist terrorism” (sic) may indeed “draw funding, support and people from the Middle East”, but it is now catastrophically clear that the US-British-Australian coalition presence in Iraq is a much more important generator of “funding, support and people” for terrorism.

Realism in Northeast Asia

The Update’s remarks on China, reported above, have already had the predictable effects: Chinese protests about the gap between Australian claims of friendship and a desire for an even closer economic relationship above that of closest trading partner, as against the Update’s patronizing warnings of the dangers of “strategic miscalculation”:

“The pace and scope of China's military modernization, particularly the development of new and disruptive capabilities such as the anti-satellite missile, could create misunderstandings and instability in the region.”

There is of course a risk of strategic miscalculation in East Asia, certainly by dictatorships anxious to use nationalism as a domestic political crutch. But as the American example shows China is not at risk alone. In the context of Australia’s deepening security relationship with Japan, calls for prudent realism need wider distribution, amongst Australia’s allies and security partners as well as those nominated as potential antagonists by Australia’s major ally. [5]

5. The demanding ally and historical constants

The core of the China problem for Australia has been well-canvassed for several years in the image of the Australian government’s nightmare of having to choose between its economic partner and its military ally. The trilateral security institutionalization now underway between the United States, Japan and Australia is certainly meant to exclude China. The Australian expression of concern about Chinese military development was itself an echo, just days apart, of Japan’s Defence Ministry statement:

“Tokyo's Defense Ministry said Beijing's military expansion plans include outer space, citing its successful missile test in January that destroyed a satellite. ‘It is highly possible that (China) is considering attacks against satellites as part of its military actions,’ the report went on, stressing that the rapid modernization of China's military forces ‘raises concerns’ and the effects on Japan ‘must be assessed carefully.’” [6]

The East Asian echo is a symptom of the deeper problem. Australia and Japan are effectively

coordinating their statements on China as a threat, in the absence of any genuine security threat. The deepening of security relations between these two countries and India is not coincidental, and is well understood by China as such. Not surprisingly, the Chinese have called Australia's bluff on the matter, resulting, as the Chinese government no doubt foretold to itself, in a humiliating backdown by the Australian Minister for Defence highly satisfactory to Middle Kingdom thinkers.

The tightening of security ties with Japan is being pursued enthusiastically without a realistic assessment of either the domestic problems that will inevitably arise from remilitarization in a country with deep and abiding democratic deficits, or the almost reckless embrace of "great power-like" security thinking and defence policies that are bringing Japan into unnecessary conflict with China, such as missile defence. [7]

But the key is the question of why the Australian government allowed itself to get into this predictable bind? It is not true that the Australian government simply does the bidding of Washington. Sometimes, as in the cases of both Afghanistan and Vietnam (and most likely Iraq) the problem is worse: Australia actively seeks participation in Washington's wars before it is asked. [8] In the case of the tie to Japan, there is a combination of strong American pressure, Japanese nationalism (directed at its own constitution and "pacifist" public rather than outward), and Australian enthusiasm for a Northeast Asian technology-heavy partner.

In the case of China it is difficult to see anything other than either deep policy confusion or an inability to refuse the demands of our major ally, even in the face of a zero security threat and entirely predictable negative consequences in relations with China.

The consequences of the demanding ally are even more clear and the consequences more dangerous in the case of Middle East policy. Australian policy towards the Middle East is almost purely derivative from US policy, and all its confusions and dangers. The exceptions to US derivation are two-fold, and both dangerous. The first, as already mentioned, is the repeated habit of Australian government's anticipating the hegemon's requirements, and volunteering for above-requirement coalition performance. Again the Update makes very clear the perceived need on the part of the Australian security establishment to actively maintain the alliance - to the point of identifying Australian security interests with those of the United States - as in the Middle East.

The second exception is a constant of Australian foreign policy which long predates the United States as preferred protector - the "common sense" of a country feeling itself displaced from the centre into an alien geo-political and cultural environment. The Update rearticulates this distinctive "common sense", this time apropos "terrorism":

"For as long as that is true Australia and like-minded countries need to fight terrorism at its source rather than wait for it to come to our shores."

And again:

"In a globalised world, ignoring problems further afield only invites these threats to come closer to Australia."

The current militarized response to what is presented as a generalized evil - "terrorism" (i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan) is a reprise of a much older Australian trait - evidenced by the rhetoric of "our shores". In World War I the Australian government issued a propaganda poster that could well be

recycled, showing bloodthirsty Huns in pointed helmets shooting an Australia farmer defending his family in front of a water tank, with the caption “Will you fight now, or wait for this?” [9] Historical constants continue to play their part in new contexts, and the destructiveness to real security needs of alliance anxiety is one such.

6. Globalisation and global problems as security threats

Globalisation is presented as one of two key factors structuring the changing strategic environment – the other being the “continued predominance of the United States, which acts as a stabilising force in the Asia-Pacific”.

Yet “globalisation” is understood at the most simplistic of levels: in fact, though presented as one of the two major drivers of world security developments, it receives barely a single paragraph of exposition. Globalisation, we are told,

“speeds up the impact and significance of existing and new threats, shortening response times, and increasing uncertainty. People, money, and ideas now move faster around the world, not always for the good.”

Accordingly, globalisation, has positive aspects (“economic growth, new export markets, and new immigrants to Australia”) and negative aspects (“the spread of extremist terrorism and diseases such as avian influenza”).

No more is said on the matter. The word, let alone the concept, does not occur again in the whole document. Globalisation is a matter of “people, money, and ideas” moving “faster around the world”. The introduction of the overland telegraph had much the same result in the era of colonial governors, and probably provoked much the same concern about “foreign ideas and outside agitators”.

What is deeply striking about the Defence Update, despite the unending and formless list of claims of “national interests” to be defended in this “globalizing world”, is that genuinely global problems that are immediately and directly salient to the security of Australians are barely mentioned. The category of “non-traditional security issues” is noted, and then effectively dismissed. The dangers of “pandemics” are referred to twice, but on neither occasion for more than a phrase or two. Stunningly, especially given the electoral context in which the Update was prepared, the word “climate” does not appear once.

Climate change, which in the view of even the Pentagon is, a matter of undoubted and immediate security relevance at both a global and national level in complex and mostly ill-understood ways, is, for all the pious talk of “non-traditional security threats” going back for a decade, is simply too big a problem to be seen. This is despite the fact that for our relations with Papua-New Guinea and the islands of the Southwest Pacific, to say nothing of Indonesia, and the economies of our trading partners, climate change and security – both the human and state varieties – are set to collide in ways we are barely beginning to understand.

Information about the author

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Other policy forums by Richard Tanter:

- [The new security architecture: Binding Japan and Australia, containing China](#) - Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 07-07A, 15 March 2007
- [Ten questions about East Timor for which we need answers](#): Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 06-18A 8 June 2006
- [The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country"](#): Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum: 06-10A 30 March 2006

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End notes

[1] [Defence Update 2007](#), Defence Department, July 2007.

[2] [Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2003](#), Department of Defence, 2003.

[3] [Australia's National Security: Defence Update 2005](#), Department of Defence, 2005.

[4] [Defence 2000 - Our Future Defence Force](#), Defence White Paper, Department of Defence, 2000.

[5] Richard Tanter, [The new security architecture: Binding Japan and Australia, containing China](#), Austral Policy Forum 07-07A, 15 March 2007.

[6] Martin Walker, [The China Pattern](#), Walker's World, UPI Online, 9 July 2007.

[7] Richard Tanter, ['With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine'](#) in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds.), *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific*, (New York: Routledge, 2005)

[8] On Australian anxiety to get into the Afghanistan action in late 2001, see Ian MacPhedran, *The Amazing SAS*, HarperCollins, 2005. On Vietnam, Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets* (1981) and *War for the Asking: How Australia Invited Itself to Vietnam* (2002).

[9] See ["Will you fight now, or wait for this?"](#), FirstWorldWar.com.

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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