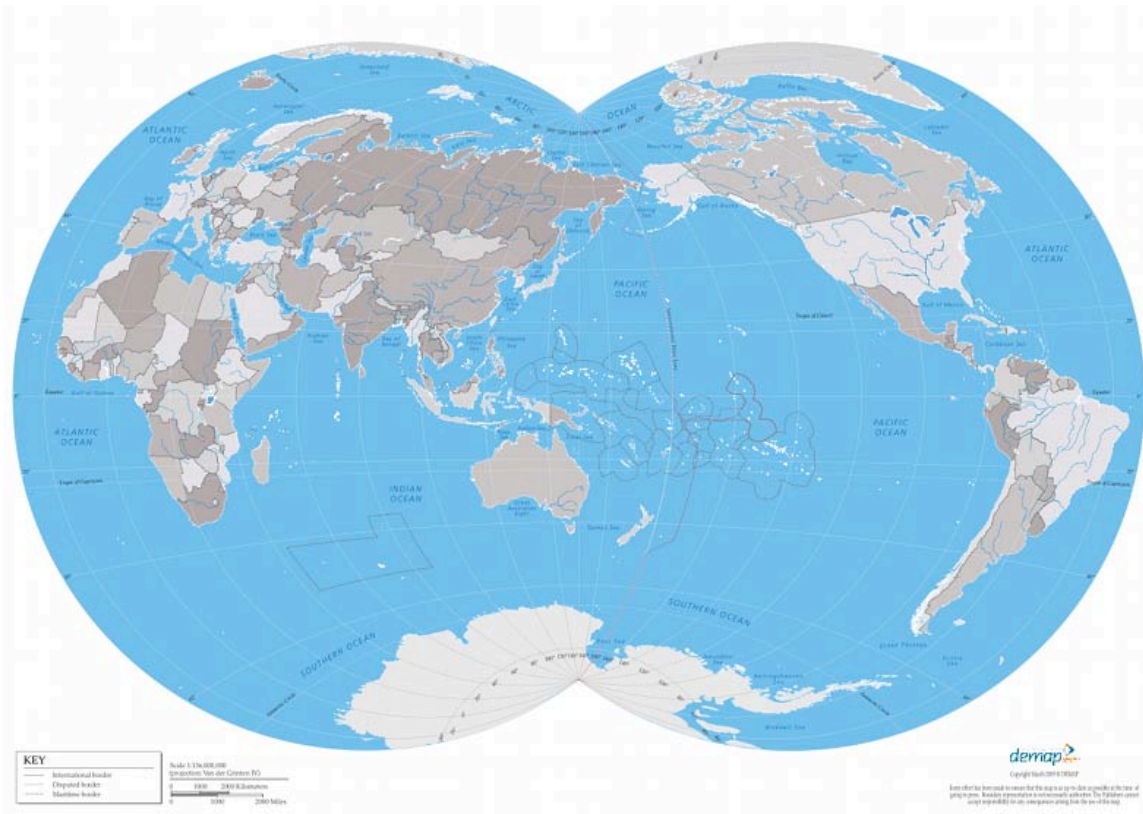




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**Force 2030: China drives Australia toward its first strategic missile system**



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## **Synopsis**

Ron Huisken of the Australian National University argues that the strikingly different dimension of Australia's recent Defence White Paper, Force 2030 – “the sharply expanded submarine force and the intent to acquire Australia's first strategic missile capability – stems from a disjointed, inconclusive but unmistakably alarmist assessment of what China is about to do to order and stability in East Asia”. Huisken notes that the missile most likely to be acquired, is today primarily used with conventional warheads, but “it began its life in the early 1980s as a strategic nuclear weapon delivery vehicle with a 200 kiloton warhead. This pedigree, and its technical performance parameters, puts it in breach of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).” It is possible, Huisken observes, that “Australia already has an understanding with the US administration regarding the acquisition of Tomahawk but this could well run into opposition in the Congress when we actually request the system.”

## **About the Author**

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## **Other articles by Ron Huisken**

- Nuclear Disarmament: Pointers For A Long Term Diplomatic Strategy, Austral Policy Forum 09-10A, 6 April 2009
- The Proliferation Security Initiative: Coming in from the Cold, Austral Policy Forum 06-13A 20 April 2006
- Uranium sales to India: What should Australia's price be? Austral Policy Forum 06-12A 10 April 2006

## Force 2030

One of the distinctive features of Australia's recent Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, is its reversion to a very traditional view of defence policy[1]. For the Rudd government, the core business of the ADF, the mission that should most strongly determine its size and structure is deterring and, as necessary, defeating any attempt to disarm and possibly invade Australia. In this traditional view, the defence budget is regarded ultimately as an insurance premium to address a risk that may be extremely remote but which is so consequential that we prefer to cover it anyway (at least to the extent of 2% of GDP). For more than a decade, we have been drawn away from this traditional posture as precedents for the use of the ADF to undertake missions other than the defence of Australia from direct attack piled up relentlessly.

Defence establishments all over the world have had the same experience, and have wondered whether it was time to consciously demote the traditional mission of preparing for large-scale war against rival states and focus more exclusively on the new agenda of nebulous, costly and prolonged counterinsurgency/counterterrorist operations. The US administration, has in fact moved in the opposite direction to Australia, that is, to direct new resources away from the capabilities intended for heavy conventional combat in favour of the capabilities needed for campaigns like Iraq in the recent past and Afghanistan at the present time, campaigns that the US now labels hybrid war. It has to be said, of course, that the Pentagon is better placed than Russell Hill to give priority to more than one capability objective. The recent policy adjustments in Washington should not be seen as a judgement that war between major powers is a thing of the past but rather as a decision to not devote the resources needed to further extend America's prevailing margin of superiority over the armed forces of other major powers. Still, it is an interesting divergence (and, inevitably, has attracted criticism that the US will lose its ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat a rival nation state).

Force 2030 frankly and repeatedly emphasises that the edifice of reasoning and the defence policy parameters derived from this reasoning rest on the fundamental assumption that 'US primacy' will remain the defining feature of the Asia Pacific over the period being assessed, that is, at least until 2030. It can be inferred from the White Paper that 'US primacy' means that the US will retain the capacities and deployment patterns, and have the resolve to preclude changes to the status quo in this region through the threat or use of force. Paragraph 3.18 states that if US primacy could no longer be confidently assumed,

the planning assumptions underpinning this White Paper would require fundamental reassessment.

The same point is addressed in different language later in the document. Paragraph 5.2 characterised Australia's abiding strategic interests as those national security interests

that concern the structure and features of the international order that ensure our security from armed attack with paragraph 5.16 adding the government's judgement

that strategic stability in the region is best underpinned by the continued presence of the United States ...its network of alliances and security partnerships...and significant levels of US military capability...located in the Western Pacific.

Despite confidence in the relevance of the White Paper, (and, by implication, confidence in the durability of US primacy through 2030), in various places and in various ways, it dips into speculation about how seriously, and how soon, this bedrock assumption might be challenged. And China is positioned unmistakably at the core of that challenge.

The Ministerial preface to the White Paper declares that the biggest changes to our outlook since 2000

have been the rise of China, the emergence of India and the beginning of the end of the so-called unipolar moment, the almost two-decades long period in which the pre-eminence of our principal ally, the United States, was without question.

Paragraph 1.8 states that "Changes in the distribution of global power have become obvious over the past decade. China's rise in economic, political and military terms has become more evident. Pronounced military modernisation in the Asia Pacific is having significant implications for our strategic outlook.

Paragraphs 2.17/18 convey the judgement that, while not likely, war between states cannot be ruled out.

Shows of force by rising powers are likely to become more common, and there is a risk that constraints on major war imposed by the international system might break down unexpectedly and relatively quickly....

Paragraph 4.19 continues this theme by suggesting that

there are likely to be tensions between the major powers of the region, where the interests of the United States, China, Japan, India and Russia intersect. As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers.

Finally, the point is driven home again in paragraph 6.27 which observes that US primacy has underwritten an unprecedented era of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific before warning

that this order is being transformed as economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power. Risks resulting from escalating

strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably, and is a factor to be considered in our defence planning.

## **Strategic Warning**

The White Paper suggests that, if Australia can be confident about getting at least a decade's warning of a new strategic challenge, we can in reasonable safety wait for the warning signs to appear rather than engage in the anticipatory acquisition of capabilities to hedge against such a development. The government is confident that we would have at least this amount of early warning in the case of our more immediate neighbours acquiring capabilities that the ADF would regard with concern (paragraph 3.15).

On the other hand, the major powers in the region could reach this threshold of ADF concern more quickly than Australia could respond if it was starting from too low a base. Accordingly, the capability aspirations set out in the White Paper are characterised as a stepping stone to the even more powerful force likely to be needed if the redistribution of strategic power in the region became so far-reaching that it called into question the weight and reach of US strategic primacy. The White Paper acknowledges frankly (3.19) that the capability aspirations set out in it constitute a strategic hedge against the erosion of this crucial foundation of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific.

## **China's military capabilities**

The White Paper asserts with conviction that China will become easily the strongest military power in Asia, that power projection capabilities will become an increasingly prominent feature of its military posture, and that we have to accept that China will go on to acquire a globally significant military capability commensurate with its prominent economic and political status. (paragraph 4.26). Curiously, however, it then goes on to suggest that China's acquisition of military capabilities

beyond the scope of what would be required for a conflict over Taiwan (paragraph 4.27)

would raise (troubling) questions about its long-strategic ambitions. This is a curious formulation in that the capabilities needed to deal with a Taiwan contingency could reasonably be characterised as no more than a stepping stone to those that would constitute a "globally significant military capability".

## **Geography**

A final indicator of how heavily China seems to have weighed in the deliberations on the White Paper is the differentiation of the tasks that the ADF may be asked to perform according to the regional or sub-regional context in which contingencies arise - the so-

called concentric circles radiating out from Australia that have so animated our defence policy debate. For the most part, these characterisations echo the judgements arrived at in the 2000 White Paper: a self-reliant capacity to engage a direct challenge to Australia in the air-sea gap; a capacity for autonomous operations, possibly in a leadership role, in the arc from East Timor, through Papua New Guinea and down into the island states of the Southwest Pacific; and working jointly with the states of Southeast Asia to meet external security challenges.

On Northeast Asia, however, the White Paper becomes more elliptical. The key section appears in paragraphs 7.13-7.18. The sub-region of Northeast Asia appears to be distinguished from the catch-all, rest of the world, category where the ADF may contribute to operations in support of global security. Rather than trying to characterise the Australian security interests that the ADF might be tasked to protect, the White Paper prefers to suggest that ADF deployments to this region would result from “meeting our alliance obligations to the United States”. Hugh White suggests that this could be an indirect way of saying, as the 2000 White Paper did, that government would not consider tasking the ADF to operate in this region of heavyweights by itself [2]. At the same time, the wording of Force2030, suggests that such operations would be an obligation rather than an imperative, even though the scale of potential contingencies range up to large-scale conflict.

## **Assessment**

Even though Defence White papers, by their nature, live in the world of the worst case, the language of Force 2030 conveys plainly that continued US primacy in the western Pacific is a dependable assumption. At the same time, the document so often dips into speculation and assessment about China’s threat to this core assumption that one wonders whether the authors really believe that US primacy is secure over the foreseeable future. This impression is strengthened by the clear sense given by the White Paper that the most conspicuous force structure innovations – the doubling of the submarine force and equipping that force with long-range land attack cruise missiles – is a down payment, a capability hedge against a China-led breakdown of the order and stability that East Asia has enjoyed for more than half a century.

The question, then, is whether this is a sensible characterisation of China’s possible intentions and capabilities, and of the timeframe in which these possibilities could arise. I would share the judgement that China will acquire the economic capacity to develop and support a suite of hard power assets that will be unmatched in the region. I would also share the judgement that, while China will be patient and methodical about assembling these assets, especially to ensure the maximum possible self-reliance and to provide scope to soften any adverse political reactions, it is resolved to do so.

The bigger question is what will China be able to do with its (by East Asian standards) disproportionately large portfolio of power? China’s economic rise, and its distinctly realist approach to international affairs, will inescapably qualify US primacy but the risk

that it will replace US primacy with its own is negligible. Even if China's development into the most comprehensively powerful state in East Asia is all but assured, states like Japan, Russia and India will all have a strategic displacement that China will have to pay serious attention to. And the United States will always loom larger than any of those three, very possibly larger than all three put together. This will translate into a very different atmosphere and dynamic in East Asia than the one we are familiar with. China's highest realistic aspiration will be to compel the US toward collegiate management of regional affairs. Acquiring that surfeit of hard and soft power that allowed the US to write the strategic script for the region for half a century lies well beyond the relevant future. Indeed, if soft power is critical and if one accepts that soft power derives ultimately from international perceptions of the integrity of a state's internal processes, primacy may in fact remain permanently out of reach for a China with an authoritarian government.

The challenge from China in the decades ahead is not that it will demolish US primacy and replace it with its own. The timeframe in which a transformation on this scale is even imaginable would be of the order of a century rather than a few decades, and even then it would require the US and the other major powers to deliberately or inadvertently cede such a role to China. The challenge from China lies in its propensity and capacity to take a long-term perspective and to bring all its instruments of power and influence to bear persistently to erode and corrode those features of the present order that it considers to be disadvantageous.

It is by no means inevitable that China's vision in this regard will prove to be unacceptable to others and put unbearable strain on the fabric of regional order and stability. This could prove to be the case, however, and it would be prudent on the part of others in the region to detect such aspects of China's vision as early as possible, signal their disquiet clearly, and gauge China's response as part of a commitment to maintain adequate countervailing power.

Force 2030 is for the most part a timely re-evaluation and reaffirmation of the nature and the priority order of the missions that government expects the ADF to prepare to be able to perform. The strikingly different dimension of Force 2030, however, – the sharply expanded submarine force and the intent to acquire Australia's first strategic missile capability – stems from a disjointed, inconclusive but unmistakably alarmist assessment of what China is about to do to order and stability in East Asia [3]. It may be appropriate for Australia to contemplate acquiring an ADF with more weight and reach in the arena of full-scale conventional war but the case for this needs a more persuasive foundation than can be found in the White Paper.

Will the United States allow us to buy the missile system we seek? It can be presumed that this is the Tomahawk or sea-launched cruise missile. Tomahawk has emerged as an astonishingly accurate means of delivering a large conventional warhead over ranges well in excess of 1000 km and was used to great effect in the conflict over Kosovo in 1999 and in the 1991 and 2003 wars against Iraq. It began its life, however, in the early 1980s as a strategic nuclear weapon delivery vehicle with a 200 kiloton warhead. This pedigree, and its technical performance parameters, puts it in breach of the Missile Technology

Control Regime (MTCR), a non-proliferation measure that seeks the maximum possible restraint on the spread of longer range missiles able to carry a nuclear, chemical or biological warhead. Both the US and Australia subscribe to this regime. The MTCR offers guidelines rather than proscribes transfers to other parties.

These guidelines allow transfers to allies and/or to recipients with strong nuclear non-proliferation credentials. The Tomahawk has already been sold to the UK and to Spain, even though such sales diminish the example that it is hoped that regime will set for transfers to states with less impeccable credentials. In addition, an element of US arms transfer policy that long predates the 1987 MTCR is a preference to not be the first to introduce a new offensive capability to a region. It all depends on which 'region' the US elects to put us in. If it is East Asia, then China and the DPRK already have ballistic and/or cruise missiles with ranges and payloads comparable to the Tomahawk. If it is just Southeast Asia, Australia would be the first to acquire such a capability. It is possible that Australia already has an understanding with the US administration regarding the acquisition of Tomahawk but this could well run into opposition in the Congress when we actually request the system.

We will have to live with the consequences of what we will likely regard in retrospect as a shallow assessment of the strategic outlook in respect of China and a premature and hairy-chested response. The good news is that we will see another White Paper, if not two, before these commitments compel significant resource allocation decisions.

## References

[1] Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2020, Defence White Paper 2009, Department of Defence, 2009.

[2] Hugh White, "A Wobbly Bridge: Strategic Interests and Objectives in Force 2030", Security Challenges, Winter 2009, p.27.

[3] Two former senior Defence officials had similar responses to the White Paper's several statements on China. See Allan Behm, "Australian Strategic Policy and the Age of Uncertainty", Strategic Challenges, Winter 2009, p.15, and Ross Cottrill, "Talking Tough: Defence White Paper 2009", The Asialink Essays, July 2009, No.5.



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