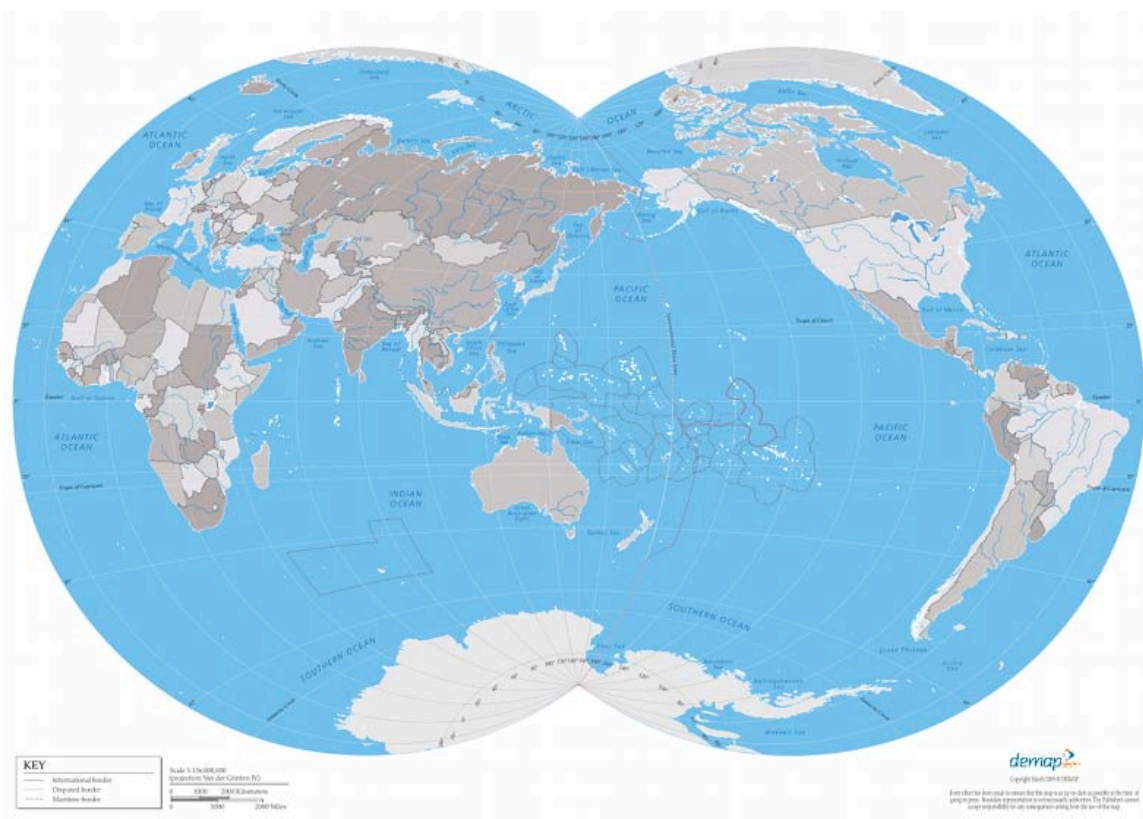




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Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 – friend in need or neighbourhood bully?



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Synopsis

Vijay Naidu of the University of the South Pacific argues that the Australian Defence White Paper 2009 “does not successfully incorporate Australia’s foreign and economic policies in its immediate neighbourhood as a possible source of instability and security risk.” It “proposes the use of ADF with other partners to stabilize countries with fragile states.” But, Naidu notes, “there is more than one type of fragile state generating security problems in the neighbourhood. Will Australia supply material support to Indonesia to maintain its territorial integrity?” Naidu argues that “the fragility of Pacific states is in many cases largely the result of the one size fits all neo-liberal economic reforms pushed on small island states of the Pacific by Australia and New Zealand”. Australia’s security, concludes Naidu, “lies in assisting development efforts through an approach characterized by enlightened self interest rather than imposing ‘Pacific solutions’ backed by the threat of using the ADF on missions to stabilize fragile states.”

About the Author

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Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 – friend in need or neighbourhood bully?

The latest Australian Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, is a strategic planning document for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to the year 2030 in the context of changing global and regional inter-state power dynamics and the emergence of non-state actors as credible threats to national security. At its heart the plan is to make the ADF more able to attend to its principal task “to deter and defeat armed attacks on Australia”. As a security strategy planning document, it is comprehensive, addressing numerous facets of security befitting a capable middle level power and the regional hegemon in Oceania. This commentary on the document is from an inhabitant of one of Australia’s island neighbours, seen as its first line of defence.

From this vantage point the whole document appears as if Australia is engaged in “shadow boxing” with an as yet to be clearly identified “enemy”. There are vestiges of Cold War doctrine in it, including strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, Malaysia and Singapore and potential threats of “axis of evil” countries North Korea and Iran. The White Paper chalks out defence strategies based on geographical proximity as the primary field of engagement, with less intense focus on more distant areas. Indonesia, East Timor and the Pacific islands to the north of Australia are of immediate concern, followed by South East Asia, and then South and East Asia. China is perceived as an emerging significant player (potential threat?) both internationally and in the region. Globally, the United States is regarded as an enduring ally with whom Australia shares strategic interests and intelligence. This relationship also increases the ADF’s capabilities and access to military hardware.

The White Paper commits long term budgetary support to the ADF so that Australia’s access to air and sea lanes are protected in the country’s interest. This approach suits very well interests that comprise the security industry. On the positive side, Australia’s commitment to non-proliferation is reinforced, as is its commitment to use ADF for disaster relief during natural and man-made crises. Global warming (to which Australia is a significant contributor) with its extreme weather events and rising sea levels is already upon us. It is reassuring that Australia is committing itself to assist small island states when disaster strikes them.

On the negative side, there are several areas of concern. First, the White Paper continues the Cold War paradigm of seeking an adversary, no matter how remote. In this era of multilateralism, it is extremely unlikely that another state actor will invade Australia, nor is military coercion likely. Second, non-state actors may seek to harm Australia, Australian interests and Australians

primarily for the reason of the ADF's intervention with the United States in the affairs of other countries. In the recent past the invasion of Iraq on the basis of unsound intelligence has drawn animosity towards Australia when none existed previously.

ADF engagement in other regions of conflict may not only increase security risks to Australia and Australians but also threaten Pacific island neighbours. This line of argument is akin to the view expressed during the Cold War by the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) Movement that American military-related bases in Australia also endangered the region if there was a nuclear war between the Americans and the Soviets.

Third, the White Paper does not successfully incorporate Australia's foreign and economic policies in its immediate neighbourhood as a possible source of instability and security risk. Yet in several places it proposes the use of ADF with other partners to stabilize countries with fragile states. The military option underwrites this position.

But there is more than one type of fragile state generating security problems in the neighbourhood. It is asserted in the White Paper that the territorial integrity of Indonesia will be respected, yet it is well known that the people of West Papua want self determination. The Indonesian military occupation of this half of the island of New Guinea has not deterred ongoing struggles for self determination. Australia's stand on this matter is reminiscent of its position on East Timor prior to 1999. There are numerous other fissiparous tendencies in Indonesia, a number seeking economic justice and regional autonomy. Will Australia supply material support to Indonesia to maintain its territorial integrity?

Fourth, the fragility of Pacific states that so concerns the White Paper authors is in many cases largely the result of the one size fits all neo-liberal economic reforms pushed on small island states of the Pacific by Australia and New Zealand through bilateral aid and regional and multilateral institutions throughout the 1990s. Deregulation, rolling back the state, promotion of market-centred economic growth, and cuts to social spending have resulted in increased inequality and poverty. State revenues declined and fragility increased. Some of the tensions and conflicts in Pacific island countries can be attributed to these economic policies. Big brothers Australia and New Zealand are now pushing Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER Plus) on island countries. PACER Plus, designed to promote free trade, is likely to promote one sided trade in favour of Australia and New Zealand with accompanying collapse of local industries and the loss of jobs. One of the fallouts of these policies was the conflict in the Solomon Islands. Will Australia and New Zealand continue to impose self serving trade and other policies on island states? And will the ADF be used to secure Australian interests when overt conflicts occur?

Fifth, for the better part of three decades, the ADF and Australia had ties with the Fiji military, providing training to officers as well as equipment. Apart from minor disruptions as a result of military coups, this relationship continued until December 2006. Australia had no difficulty in supporting what was and is in fact an ethnic army in a multi-ethnic society. Australian business interests have profited immensely from this country. Fiji is now in deep political and economic crisis, and is looking north to China, and to a lesser extent India. While there is a long and abiding relationship between Fiji and Australia that no amount of turning north will extinguish, there are issues for Australia to deal with –that will not go away with the posturing in the white paper. There are no concrete proposals in the White Paper about dealing with seriously difficult national questions in some of the island states except the vague suggestion of ‘stabilisation’.

In its immediate neighbourhood (whether backyard or front porch) Australia’s security lies in assisting development efforts through an approach characterized by enlightened self interest rather than imposing “Pacific solutions” backed by the threat of using the ADF on missions to stabilize fragile states. The ugly American of a generation ago might be replaced by the ugly Australian in this part of the world.

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