



## White paper trail

The Australia Defence Association has been commenting on Defence White Papers since the first one in 1976. These preliminary comments on the latest paper, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, published on 02 May 2009, reflect this long-term view and approach.

The 2009 Defence White Paper (WP09) is a much broader framed and generally more objective analysis than its 1976, 1987, 1994 and 2000 predecessors. This is largely due to it being developed by much more consultative and professional processes. These have been much more successful in seeking out and including ADF and other professional advice rather than excluding or diluting them. The thorough wargaming of potential strategic scenarios, and the force structure and other defence capability options needed to deter, otherwise handle or risk-manage them, was also a major improvement in the process.

All Defence White Papers have the intrinsic limitation that they are declaratory policy freely available to encourage international strategic transparency. Such papers can never reveal all Australia's strategic assessments and conclusions – nor all their resultant strategy and force structure implications. This is why the rigid belief in some academic and bureaucratic quarters that treats the text of White Papers as holy writ – supposedly the sole justification to maintain particular defence capabilities or not – has always been so nugatory and at times dangerous to due process in planning and executing our national defence.

As a large and complex document WP09 has some real and apparent inconsistencies in some of its reasoning and declarations. The ADA will therefore be seeking clarification of some detail before commenting comprehensively. This issue of *Defence Brief* notes some brief general points concerning financing, strategic policy, force structure and the actual execution of strategy, and the general style of the paper. •

## Investment rorts

The single greatest failure of the 1976, 1987 and 1994 White Papers was that subsequent governments of both political persuasions did not adequately fund the defence capabilities and defence strategies the papers acknowledged and specified as being necessary. By the year 2000, for example, and by the most conservative estimate in year-2000 dollars, the gap between the funding promised since 1976 and the defence investment actually delivered was at least \$A105bn – or seven to eight years worth of defence budgets at that time.

The 2000 White Paper started to tackle these serious failures in long-term national governance and planning. It began the process of redressing the enormous back-log of defence capability deficiencies caused by decades of sustained under-investment and policy incoherence. This especially involved specifying a three per cent real increase annually in defence funding as a way of catching up for the prolonged under-investment – and the block obsolescence, capability hollowness and logistical and personnel shortfalls it entrenched. Both the later Howard, and now the Rudd, Governments have continued this level of funding. *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* continues it out to 2017-18 but at only 2.2 per cent from 2018-19 to 2030. This lower rate will probably be insufficient and is more a pious hope than a realistic intention.

A brief one and a half page chapter addresses, in the barest outline, how it is intended to meet the long-term defence investment levels the paper specifies as necessary. The paper also outlines a design whereby future White Papers will be developed at five-year intervals with supporting studies, force structure reviews and financial audits being undertaken in the preceding year. The lack of a robust cyclic approach has without doubt contributed to confused strategic policy making over recent decades by governments of both political persuasions.

WP09 also replaces the non-farm GDP deflator with a fixed 2.5 per cent index to cater for the perpetual decline in the monetary value of the funding allocated, especially where much of it has to be spent overseas. This fixed indexation is aimed at removing the volatility of the previous floating deflator and, over the long periods envisaged, will hopefully balance out. The precise calculation of the 2.5 per cent figure is not explained in the paper and the reasoning behind it will need explanation at some stage, not least because long-term funding is the Achilles heel of all Defence White Papers.

However, the chapter unfortunately also includes the abrupt cop-out statement that '... shortfalls against the White Paper funding plan will be offset by Defence'. Coupled with the intention to find \$A2bn annually in supposed 'savings' from within the existing defence budget in order to meet the White Paper's funding plan – a tenfold increase in that thought possible in the 2000 White Paper – there are obviously serious doubts that the plan can be achieved without risking considerable and serious detriment to existing and future operational capabilities. •

## Baring our strategic fundamentals

Although sometimes WP09 reads more like a doctrine manual than a White Paper, and at times it confuses defence policy with strategy, the paper is broadly logical in its analysis of Australia's likely strategic environment over the next two decades. Most of the apparent inconsistencies seem to be more the result of unclear expression and poor editing rather than fundamental conceptual misunderstandings or flawed analysis.

The paper also generally makes sense about the likely roles the ADF may be required to undertake to execute strategy, and with the relevant development and employment priorities in terms of force balance. The emphasis on joint-focused, balanced and adaptive force is admirable. This is an implicit rejection of the way previous White Papers tried (and failed) to predict future strategic trends in detail and then narrowly configure the ADF in supposed response. Moreover, the experiences and lessons from ADF operations in the immediate region, and further afield, over the ten years since the East Timor intervention in 1999 have been incorporated appropriately, not ignored or rejected.

WP09 does, however, paint one or two false either/or challenges in its reasoning on overall defence policy, such as its oversimplification about the nature of the clash between the old Defence-of-Australia' (DOA) and expeditionary approaches.

The paper is rightly and refreshingly quite frank and forthright about our relationships with allies, neighbours and the region's great powers. That China may not appreciate such candour is to be expected but, as the paper notes, China only has itself to blame, especially the lack of transparency in its own strategic policy and force development initiatives.

WP09 rightly emphasises the essentiality of the ADF having improved strategic and operational mobility in the immediate region – and for us to adopt ‘... a fundamentally maritime strategy’ to meet the ‘primary obligation to deter and defeat attacks on Australia’. However, the document appears to have several inconsistencies in its reasoning in regard to what it terms the ‘amphibious manouvre required’.

It correctly stresses that we need to be able to ‘control the sea and air approaches to Australia’ and ‘project force in our maritime environment’. Both statements constitute implicit rejections of central tenets of the old Defence-of-Australia theory which believed the approaches only had to be ‘denied’. The paper seems somewhat confused in places about the absolutely essential role of major surface combatants and supporting land forces in such amphibious manouvre. The paper’s use of outmoded controversial terms, such as ‘sea-air gap’ instead of the modern usage ‘sea-air-land gap’, is also disappointing.

These may be only problems of terminology and poor editing but they need clarifying to avoid confusion generally. And to remove the opportunity for mischievous misrepresentation by single-issue, single-platform or single-Service advocates in particular. ●

## Sense and sensibilities

With some notable exceptions, in terms of the future force structure proposed WP09 largely reaffirms or builds on existing concepts, developments and trends. This is especially so concerning strategic decisions stemming from the 2002-03 Defence Capability Review (DCR) affecting the whole ADF, and the 2005 Hardening and Networking (HNA) and 2007 Enhanced Land Force (ELF) projects affecting the Army. Due to the paper’s underlying partisan political narrative this continuity is downplayed or omitted outright.

The principal exceptions are the doubling of the future submarine fleet, the reduction in major surface combatants, the introduction of land-attack cruise missiles (in the new submarines and frigates) and, to some extent, the enhancing of cyber warfare capabilities.

Virtually all the force structure proposals affecting the Army and the Air Force are matters that reaffirm or further advance existing plans and projects. There is nothing untoward in this. It largely reflects the fact that such ideas principally emanate from professional and other expert advice to any government, from the Department of Defence, the ADF and other sources, on how to best meet that government’s requirements.

The ADA notes the intention to pool the Navy and Army utility helicopter fleets using a common platform (the MRH-90) and trusts this will be only the first step to the joint helicopter command the Association has advocated for some years.

There is no specific mention of tanks or the need for at least a minimal heavy armoured capability for joint and combined-arms operations in the immediate region (as defined by WP09), although this is implicit in numerous other statements concerning maritime manouvre and land force capabilities. This is a pity. It provides opportunities for further confusion and for dishonest claims by those who wrongly conclude that the Army and the ADF will not ever need such a capability (limited as it is). This unfortunately also provides succour to those who make ahistoric or uninformed claims that such capabilities are somehow not relevant to joint operations in our immediate region.

Similarly, it would surely have been better to actually state that the Army’s next generation of lighter armoured vehicles need to include Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV) rather than the more longwinded expression ‘new vehicles [with] ... greatly improved firepower, protection and mobility, in response to the increasing complexity and lethality of land operations’. ●

## Pride and prejudices

The absence of maps is no doubt deliberate, perhaps to avoid further sterile posturing between DOA advocates and those who object to concentric circles drawn on maps as a basis for defence policy. There are, however, some aspects of *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* that are disappointing in the sense of opportunities lost.

Despite its title, which is the most imaginative for a White Paper thus far, WP09 is somewhat old-fashioned in that its analysis and logic often seems to have failed to embrace joint-Service concepts, terminology and vision to the extent expected or desirable.

On the face of it, there is far too much analysis and explanation using outmoded single-Service thinking and terminology. In the modern, integrated ADF, particularly at the strategic level, there are no longer capabilities that should be categorised or described purely along Navy, Army or Air Force lines. Both the Department of Defence bureaucracy and the Services appear to be responsible for this, and it probably is yet another tragic result of the way previous white paper processes exacerbated inter-Service frictions rather than resolved them.

The chapter on personnel is more descriptive than analytical. It offers few details on the considerable workforce and financial challenges to be faced in staffing the ADF out to 2030.

The paper has also been insufficiently edited. The at times dense expression, proliferation of jargon and often inconsistent terminology has resulted in unnecessary potential for confusion. Defence White Papers have traditionally assumed an almost theological purpose among the bureaucratic and academic cognoscenti. The accidental contradictions apparent in WP09 will no doubt fuel years of misunderstandings and argument.

Lastly, aspects of WP09 unfortunately employ an unduly party-political tone whereby what are continuing capability development trends and re-equipment projects are expressed in ways that might give rise to the unfounded belief that they are bold new ventures, presumably meant to be by the incumbent government alone. As noted above, while much of the strategic thinking and candour is fresh, many of the capability development decisions specified or outlined have a long genesis in departmental or defence force thinking. This is not unusual, of course, because the 2002-03 DCR and the current White Paper both involved expert professional input from the Department of Defence and the ADF, and such apolitical advice was and remains available to any government – as it should be. ●

## Persuasion and realities

Finally, for all the historical limitations of the Defence White Paper process in general, and WP09 as the current product in particular, this paper does move us on from most of the increasingly sterile and theological-type debates that have bedevilled much of our national strategic thinking since the mid 1980s. WP09 certainly provides a good basis for informed debate on modernising and rebuilding the ADF so it has enough depth and breadth in capability, and overall adaptability, that it can actually execute strategic policy – and offer future governments real options to hedge, shape, deter or handle strategic challenges that we cannot possibly foresee in detail now. ●

## Irony corner

On the day the Minister for Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, was the target of an Opposition censure motion concerning alleged deficiencies in his ministerial supervision of the Department of Defence, Prime Minister Rudd reassigned one and a half of the two parliamentary secretaries needed to assist the Minister in his governance of this large, complex and important portfolio. ●