

# Formulating the 2015 Defence White Paper <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Defence White Papers (DWPs) are unclassified assessments of Australia's position in the world and, as a consequence, influence the posture and conception of the ADF. Due to their public nature, the documents are often the depictions of the world that the government-of-the-day wishes to project. Stephan Frühling argues that this is natural, as DWPs converse on 'the use of force, [the] preparation for it and strategic commitments to allies and friends', which are all issues that are 'inherently political'.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Jennings goes further, noting DWPs also 'carry the personal hopes of ministers and the political aspirations of the governments which sponsor them'.<sup>3</sup> However, as Allan Behm suggests, not only do DWPs act as a political justification for the cost of the defence budget but they broadcast the 'what and why' of national defence planning and influence the geostrategic picture.<sup>4</sup>

This article argues that, divorced of politics, the strategic assessments in the 2009 and 2013 DWPs are a continuation of the same narrative, which should continue to be developed in the 2015 paper. This will be analysed through three key strategic environmental elements in the 2009 and 2013 papers: the US, China and the Indo-Pacific concept. Similarities and differences within the 2009 and 2013 papers will be discussed, before reflecting on the utility of these assessments for the upcoming 2015 DWP.

## The US alliance

The 2009 DWP was developed in the midst of a global recession.<sup>5</sup> The US had been tested and stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan. Incoming President Barack Obama declared at his inauguration that America's 'power grows through its prudent use', with security emanating from 'tempering qualities of humility and restraint'.<sup>6</sup> The DWP, titled *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, illustrated the importance of the alliance, observing that the US was likely to remain the 'most powerful and influential strategic actor'.<sup>7</sup> However, it also sent mixed messages.

After the paper's release, Rod Lyon and Andrew Davies urged that Washington be reassured on Australia's commitment to the ANZUS treaty.<sup>8</sup> Because of the paper's overtures on self-reliance, they expressed concern that the Rudd Government did not expect US assistance if Australia were attacked by a minor power, a sentiment seemingly laced throughout the White Paper.

Reflecting on the years preceding 2009, the paper warned that the US might find itself 'preoccupied and stretched', thus its ability to 'shift attention and power project' in a region such as Australia's was 'constrained'.<sup>9</sup> In terms of defining Australia's military goals, the paper asserted that Australia wished to 'act independently', as it would 'not wish to be reliant' on the forces of another power; further, *Force 2030* argued for an ADF capability to lead military coalitions 'in part to compensate for the limited capacity or engagement of others'.<sup>10</sup>

The proposal to upgrade military hardware was justified from a sober assessment of Washington's 'capacity and willingness to continue to play a stabilising role in the region'.<sup>11</sup> The DWP also indicated that while the US might be more reliant on its partners in the future—therefore justifying an expansion of Australia's military—the alliance had changed by the very nature of China's rise, regardless of other underlying factors. Hugh White agreed, noting that the US alliance would be a 'declining strategic asset' as its leadership in the Asia-Pacific would be either 'weaker, diluted, contested or abandoned'.<sup>12</sup>

The 2013 DWP used much more placatory language regarding the US but it was written in a different strategic circumstance, at a time when Prime Minister Gillard found herself presiding over a large budget deficit.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more influential, however, was the 2011 speech President Obama gave in the Australian Parliament, saying:

As President, I have, therefore, made a deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends.<sup>14</sup>

Defence Minister Stephen Smith explained in the foreword of the austerely titled *Defence White Paper 2013* that Obama's 'rebalance' towards the region had been a major factor in the paper's conclusions.<sup>15</sup> He also rationalised the shift of policy based on 'substantially enhanced practical cooperation with the United States'.<sup>16</sup> The Gillard Government stressed Australia's interest in the US being active and engaged in the region but also sought 'reassurances from Washington about its ongoing commitment to underwrite regional security'.<sup>17</sup> Further, the 2013 document significantly departed from its predecessor in revealing that while Australia's defence policy was based on the 'principle of self-reliance', that needed to be seen within 'the context of our Alliance with the United States' and partners.<sup>18</sup>

One might be persuaded that the 2009 paper's treatment of the alliance was an aberration, while the 2013 iteration was a natural transition back to sober ground. This would be a misreading of the situation. Rudd was no isolationist and certainly not anti-American.<sup>19</sup> He was knowledgeable in American politics and used the 2009 DWP as a device to encourage the US to take heed of the Chinese threat and to secure its engagement in Australia's region.

Rudd reportedly told US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009 that his plan for an 'Asia-Pacific community' was to curb China's power and ensure its rise did not result in 'an Asia without the US'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the independent streak in *Force 2030* drove home that desire. Weeks before President Obama's 2011 address in Canberra, Clinton noted that America's alliances with regional partners, including Australia, were 'the fulcrum for our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific'.<sup>21</sup> Thus the 2009 DWP manoeuvred around Hugh White's concerns of American irrelevancy to ensure a strategic victory for Australia which was revealed on the pages of the 2013 edition.

Herein lies the challenge for the treatment of the US in the 2015 DWP. Both 2009 and 2013 were correct in their assessments but for different reasons. While Rudd may have used concepts of independence and self-reliance as a *raison d'être* for enhanced ADF capability, it is this enhanced capability that makes the US more willing to partner with Australia in the region.

The irony of the situation is that in no uncertain terms can Australia hope to defend itself without its major ally—but an over-reliance on American assistance can be seen in a negative light as Australia not sharing the strategic burden.<sup>22</sup> To balance the expectations of the US and the Australian taxpayer, the 2015 paper should be frank on the ADF's ability to defend the country. This will explain how the US alliance is the 'opportunity cost' of much larger expenditure—and, therefore, what a high-yielding dividend Australia achieves for its proposed 2 per cent of GDP funding on defence.

However, even this may not be enough to keep the US focused in the region. Obama signalled in 2012 that after the Afghanistan mission wound down, America's priority would be to focus on 'nation building' at home, asking the Congress to pay down debt and reinvest in America.<sup>23</sup> Most ominous perhaps was Obama's major foreign policy address at West Point in May 2014, when he noted America would only fight for its core interests, such as the security of allies, but failed to mention any of Asia's security challenges.<sup>24</sup> The 2015 DWP needs to articulate the requirement for US forces to remain rebalanced to the region.<sup>25</sup>

## The depiction of China

Far more controversial than the status of the alliance was the depiction of China in *Force 2030*. The 2009 paper gave particular distinction to the 'The Strategic Implications of the Rise of China', apportioning the People's Republic of China a separate sub-chapter.<sup>26</sup> While only two years earlier China had surpassed Japan as Australia's largest trading partner, the DWP pulled no punches in relegating the economic relationship to second place, stating that 'economic interdependence will not preclude inter-state or conflicts or tensions short of war'.<sup>27</sup>

The strategic justification for this statement can be found in the 'Rise of China' section and, in many ways, this is the most revealing passage concerning Australia's new strategic paradigm, wherein:

China will also be the strongest Asian military power, by a considerable margin. Its military modernisation will be increasingly characterised by the development of power projection capabilities... [T]he pace, scope and structure of China's military modernisation have the potential to give its neighbours cause for concern if not carefully explained.<sup>28</sup>

In a relatively-benign external threat environment, the reasoning for China building and modernising the People's Liberation Army had challenged security analysts. The Chinese military budget had seen double-digit percentage increases for almost all of the 30 years prior to *Force 2030* and, compounding this, the estimated gap between reported and actual military spending had grown to 72 per cent.<sup>29</sup>

This pointed to Chinese aspirations and ambitions of becoming a 'great power' in order to 'secure its global interests and trade routes', as well as having the forces to 'provide muscle behind its diplomacy'.<sup>30</sup> These interests were seen to be expanding, evidenced in March 2009 when the USNS *Impeccable* was subjected to 'reckless and dangerous manoeuvres' by five Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, as China began to make assertions that its 'nine-dash-line' claim to that area was not subject to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.<sup>31</sup>

The need for trepidation was clear. However, the problem with *Force 2030* was seen to be one of language and diplomatic tact—on one hand pointing to China's ambitious rise and, on the other, justifying a new suite of ADF capability. However, Rudd's influence on the paper had a much more decisive influence than the mooted 'victory for Canberra hawks'.<sup>32</sup>

In an address filled with Chinese cultural nuance, he explained to students at Beijing University that China's rise was having 'a great impact not just on China but also on the world', before indicating that while Australia was a friend, it was an honest friend.<sup>33</sup> He described Australia as a *zhengyou*, a friend who 'offers unflinching advice and counsels restraint'.<sup>34</sup> In the absence of a foreign policy white paper, *Force 2030* was the vehicle to announce a change in Australia's strategic thinking.

While it would be simpler to view the 2013 paper's more measured treatment of China as a reflection of Prime Minister Gillard's foreign policy inexperience—and a movement away from the Rudd legacy—the truth of the matter is far different.<sup>35</sup> The 2013 DWP was influenced by a measured whole-of-government policy process, through the precursor National Security Strategy and Asian Century White Paper.

The underlying message of the DWP did not change regarding China but the bureaucracy used the interceding four years to wordsmith the message, with the 2013 formulation that 'Australia welcomes China's rise' and 'does not approach China as an adversary', while seeing China's military modernisation as 'a natural and legitimate outcome of its economic growth'.<sup>36</sup> However, as Brendan Taylor asserts, despite the 'softer tone' there remained a 'sting in the tail' towards China beneath the surface of the text.<sup>37</sup>

Symbolically, the China and US sections of the paper were combined. In a more conciliatory tone, the 2013 paper argued that while rivalry was inevitable between the US and China, both major powers sought 'stability and prosperity, not conflict'.<sup>38</sup> This aligned with the January 2013 National Security Strategy which noted Beijing and Washington's 'clear economic interests in preserving the security and stability of the region'.<sup>39</sup>

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), which had ownership of the National Security Strategy, was also responsible for the delivery of the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* a year before. A distinctly diplomatic document, it stated that 'Australia's alliance with the United States and a strong US presence in Asia will support regional stability, as will China's full participation in regional developments'.<sup>40</sup> It further asserted that Australia aimed to promote 'cooperative arrangements among the major powers in the region while keeping a 'comprehensive approach to security', noting the DWP would take its lead from PM&C's guidance.<sup>41</sup>

While the underlying narrative of the 2009 and 2013 DWPs is consistent on China, the 2015 paper might find it difficult to keep a diplomatic tone. The 2013 paper directed the ADF to focus on strengthening defence ties within the region. However, in doing this through bilateral means, Australia may be seen to be either aligning itself with a particular country's position or having no position by being a 'man for all seasons'.

Countries to Australia's north confront a much more dire situation regarding China's assertiveness and, by aligning with states such as Vietnam and The Philippines, the 2013 paper's tone on China may appear disingenuous. Similarly, in signing a defence technology transfer agreement with Japan, at the same time that Prime Minister Abe announced a reinterpretation of Japan's peace-time constitution, could cast doubt on Australia's impartiality in growing tensions in the East China Sea.<sup>42</sup> The only way in which the 2015 DWP can reconcile these positions is to actively pursue a bilateral defence relationship with China or advocate for a regional multilateral security framework that brings all actors to the same table.<sup>43</sup>

## The Indo-Pacific concept

While the intricacies in Australia's relationships with its most important partners were centre stage in 2009 and 2013, arguably the most important feature of the DWPs was the attempt to reconstruct the region's geopolitical architecture. The evolution from an emphasis on the Asia-Pacific to the trans-oceanic Indo-Pacific reflected a growing confidence within Australian strategic thought. In this regard, we should see the entrance of the Indo-Pacific construct in the 2013 paper as not a rejection of previous policy but a natural extension.

Australia has long had an 'order-building approach' to its regional engagement.<sup>44</sup> As Labor Prime Ministers, Rudd and Gillard were acutely aware of Hawke's legacy in founding the APEC forum in 1989. Asian engagement, the third pillar of Labor's foreign policy platform, was a central focus when Rudd launched the 'Asia-Pacific Community' proposal in 2004.<sup>45</sup> This concept would build on perceived deficiencies in the existing regional architecture, whereby ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three focused on Southeast and East Asia; the East Asia Summit included India, Australia and New Zealand but not the US; and APEC included the major Asia-Pacific economies but not India.<sup>46</sup>

Rudd stated that the region had something to learn from the European experience, and advocated for an Asia-Pacific Community that enhanced a sense of regional security.<sup>47</sup> Dismissing the complexities of security architecture in the region, the 2009 DWP explained that this approach was directly related to 'enhancing strategic stability' by embracing the US, Japan, China, India and Indonesia in a 'regional security architecture'.<sup>48</sup>

Identifying India as a strategic counter-weight to China was significant, especially with lingering doubts about America's true intentions. *Force 2030* indicated a shift to a new strategic concept when espousing that 'the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to [Australia's] maritime strategy and defence planning'.<sup>49</sup> Jack McCaffrie and Chris Rahman suggest that far from promoting an 'Asia-Pacific century', *Force 2030* elevated 'the importance of the Indian Ocean in Australia's strategic thinking'.<sup>50</sup>

While the *Asian Century* paper had mentioned the Indo-Pacific concept, by the time of the 2013 DWP it was a headline act. Hailing from West Australia, then Defence Minister Stephen Smith suggested that the Indo-Pacific had emerged as the 'world's strategic centre of gravity', as it was 'home to three of the world's superpowers—the United States, China and India'.<sup>51</sup> Rory Medcalf and James Brown point out that Australia was the first country to use the Indo-Pacific term, and the 2013 paper itself concedes that the system was still 'emerging' from an 'unsurprisingly... series of sub-regions and arrangements rather than a unitary whole'.<sup>52</sup>

While unquestionably the concept is one that is applicable to Australia's geostrategic circumstance, for the major powers the argument was less convincing. Beijing, always suspicious of India, was less than enamoured with a concept that makes India the default power in the Indian Ocean, making strange bedfellows with America which had no 'core interest' in the Indian Ocean.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, while Australia might look to build on the 2009 'Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation', India might be 'less willing', as its policy of 'ambiguity and equivocality' has served it well to this point.<sup>54</sup> But this analysis oversimplifies the issue.

China also views itself as an Indian Ocean power, as evidenced by its so-called 'string of pearls' policy and recent exercises in the ocean accessed via Australia's northern approaches.<sup>55</sup> The communique from the 2014 Australia-US Ministerial (AUSMIN) meeting noted the alliance as a demonstration of 'the United States' strong commitment to the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean', which included harnessing opportunities for greater defence cooperation in the region.<sup>56</sup> India too is becoming more strategically assertive at a

time when Australia is seeking to develop links with it. Prime Minister Modi has articulated a case for a more self-confident India within the region.<sup>57</sup>

In 2015, with an influential Western Australian as Foreign Minister, the Government is unlikely to be opposed to the Indo-Pacific concept, nor has the strategic environment altered to warrant foregoing the term. In March 2014, then Defence Minister Senator Johnston told an Indonesian audience that ‘for Western Australians, an Indo-Pacific orientation flows in our blood’.<sup>58</sup> However, the issue of the Indo-Pacific is not one of geopolitics or strategy but rather one of domestic economics.

Peter Jennings—who chairs the 2015 DWP expert panel—agreed, noting that previous papers had issues with fiscal imbalance not strategy.<sup>59</sup> While the current government has consistently maintained that the 2015 paper would be costed, Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith suggest that the only option for reducing the distance between budget and strategic ambition is to reduce preparedness and modernisation.<sup>60</sup>

But this is not the only option. For the 2015 DWP, there must be not only a reconciliation between budget and force structure but an indication of Australia’s political will to build and invest in the new Indo-Pacific model in the interests of regional security. The paper must articulate the role Australia has in developing the Indo-Pacific architecture—and whether the Government sees the system as a framework for a broader Asia-Pacific community or as simply a caricature of where Australia sees itself in the world. The Government must fund the Indo-Pacific policy, which includes force structuring the ADF in a way that allows it to be influential across the strategic arc.

## Conclusion

While it might be enticing to characterise the next DWP as a policy rebuke of former governments, this would be a mistake. Far from being an articulation of political aspiration, the 2015 DWP should be a continuation of the same strategic narrative that has developed from 2009 through 2013. The paper should enunciate to the taxpayer why Australia needs the US alliance and, in parallel, frame a strategic environment that leaves the Americans in no doubt about the importance of the rebalance.

With regards to China, overcoming the political imperative for non-offence, the paper must reconcile the regional defence engagement strategy with the posturing of many Asian nations against China’s assertiveness. If the Government truly wishes to not partake in a zero-sum game against China’s rise, it must work towards bringing China into its regional defence diplomacy and developing workable security mechanisms. Finally, the DWP must clarify what the Indo-Pacific concept means in a strategic sense and link this to ADF capability and budget. The paper must also define Australia’s role within this architecture.

The success of the 2015 paper should be adjudicated on an honest and frank assessment of the strategic environment that links to an appropriate force structure. Simply fitting a strategic picture and capability suite to a tidy figure of 2 per cent of GDP does Australia no favours.

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## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are the author’s, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defence, or the Australian Government more broadly.

## NOTES

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper titled 'An essay comparing the strategic assessments of Australia's environment contained in the 2009 and 2013 Defence White Papers, with recommendations on which of these should guide the 2015 paper', submitted by the author while attending the Australian Command and Staff Course at the Australian Command and Staff College at the Australian Defence College in 2014.
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- 43 Such a bilateral relationship with China is not a long bow to draw considering the progress in 2014. The PLA worked closely with the ADF in the search for MH370, notably the carriage of a PLA-N liaison officer on HMAS

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- Success. Joint exercises on Australian and Chinese soil have been organised in Exercises Phoenix Spirit and Kowari. Two ADF doctors have also worked aboard the Chinese hospital ship *Peace Arch* during a humanitarian voyage through the South Pacific. Regarding regional architectures, building such a security mechanism is not an anathema to China, as it has recently increased its exercising with Russian forces as a part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation construct. See Joshua Kucera, 'Russia and the SCO Military Exercises', The Diplomat website, 28 August 2014, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/russia-and-the-sco-military-exercises/>> accessed 12 September 2014.
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