Fundamental Issues

I have been a student of Defence policy and Defence White Papers for the past 40 or so years. Over that time I have been continually struck by the lack of understanding of fundamental defence concepts, particularly in successive White Papers. A good example of this “confusion of thought” is Chapter 2 of the current Defence Issues Paper. This Chapter would appear to be the work of “spin doctors”; it is not, I sincerely hope, the work of serious defence analysts.

Chapter 2 opens with talk about “providing security for Australia from attack, or the threat of attack”. Providing security from “threat of attack” would literally involve changing the current world order, a task that is well beyond Australia’s capacity. Security against attack itself is what is important; threats alone are of much less importance, and do little harm unless transformed into reality.

Defence White Papers are drawn up by the Department of Defence and hence, presumably, are concerned with issues that are the prime responsibility of that Department, which is, in shorthand, the defence of Australia against military attack. As to the White papers themselves their intent is, again I presume, to explain the proposed future force structure of the Australian Defence Force and other Defence policies to the Parliament and to the general public.

Traditionally, defence forces have been structured to meet military threats, and certainly that is how the Australian Defence Force is currently structured. Chapter 2 talks about “prevention of non-geographic threats, such as those from cyberspace, terrorism, transnational crime, people smuggling, and illegal fishing.” None of these matters, important and pressing though they may be for the future wellbeing of the Nation, are the prime responsibility of the Department of Defence, notwithstanding that from time to time elements of the Defence organisation have been used to support other Government Departments and Agencies in countering threats in these areas.

Another area of confusion, not referred to in Chapter 2 but nevertheless of importance, is the history since of Second World War of employing significant elements of the ADF as expeditionary forces in various overseas conflicts, such as Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. These expeditions have not been in the direct military defence of Australia from military attack, but rather in support of broader Government policies in the international arena, some of which have nevertheless been closely related to the prime Defence task. Notwithstanding their individual and collective importance, they should not be used to inform the future structure of the Defence Force, any more than should the items listed in the previous paragraph. Here, I need to add a caveat, and that is: unless the Government wishes to redefine the primary responsibility of the Department of Defence and the role of the Australian Defence Force.

Chapter 2 states, inter alia: “That the ability to prevent and deter attacks on Australia and our national interests remains a cornerstone of our defence policy settings.” Here I would like to make several points:

(a) The word “military” should be inserted before the word “attacks”.
(b) The word “deter” in the phrase “prevent and deter” is unnecessary; to deter means to prevent.
(c) The concept of prevention of attack, rather than merely taking military action to counter an attack, is important. The priority thrust of Australia’s defence policy should be to prevent war rather than merely having the
ability to successfully fight it if prevention should fail. Indeed, if we have to go to war, our defence policy would have failed. Here the current attention on the 100th Anniversary of the First World War should bring home the utter futility of war and the great loss and suffering that can fall on the victors as well as the vanquished.

(d) Here it is also relevant to mention, in broad terms, the ways available to Australia to prevent war being waged against us. The first is by diplomatic means; to establish trust and friendship with our neighbours. The second is by means of military deterrence, by having a Defence Force of our own that is able to counter such levels of military attack that are within our capability; and by having “great and powerful friends” who will, at the very least in critical circumstances beyond our own capability, come to our aid.

(e) The concept of deterrence is one that requires clarification. There are, briefly, two forms of deterrence, offensive and defensive. The concept of offensive deterrence comes from the nuclear era where each side threatened massive nuclear retaliation if attacked by the other. In the conventional context offensive deterrence consists of, to draw on Aunty Jack and Ross Babbage, a threat to a potential attacker to “rip a bloody arm off”, should he be so foolish as to attack you. On the other hand, the defensive deterrent is the traditional one of having sufficient defensive capability as to render any attack “unlikely to succeed”, thus deterring the attacker from attempting such a course. In my view the offensive deterrent is offensive in both forms of the word, and along with the “pre-emptive strike” should be placed in the defence planners’ wastepaper bin.

(f) From the comments in the previous sub-paragraphs comes the view that Australia’s defence posture should be defensive rather than offensive, which is probably contrary to the traditional military view that “the only way to win wars is by offensive action.” Here my answer is that we should not be trying to win wars but prevent them.

The item “protection of trade routes” may be one that is considered military in nature. However, it is also one that is huge in scope, given the global nature of Australia’s trade routes, the number and nature of our trading partners, the number of “flags” represented by the vessels carrying that trade, and the fact that trade routes exist on the surface of the ocean and in the air. Clearly the issue of “protection of trade routes” needs to be limited in some way so as to bring it into manageable proportions.

If my traditional view of Defence, as being concerned primarily with military matters, is wrong, or out of date, then the forthcoming White Paper needs to clearly spell out just what has changed and just what the Department of Defence is responsible for. Here, however, I would caution that the problems of military defence are quite different from those of defence against other types of attack, such as cyber attack, terrorism, people smuggling, transnational crime, and illegal fishing. Each of these in turn have their own set of unique problems. To lump them all into the one grab-bag is to invite confusion.

Please, for 2015 can we have a Defence White Paper that contains less spin and more careful and considered analysis?

Norman Ashworth
10 August 2014