Some observations for the 2015 Defence White Paper

1. The next time, if ever, Australia might be involved in a major war it will be in a very different strategic setting from anything that can be envisaged now. That is the lesson of history.

2. The rate of change is now very different from the past - it is exponential. We might be able to anticipate contingencies 10 years from now. Indeed, a strategic basis plan formed in the early 1970s still looked moderately good in the 1990s. But 20 years from now and beyond everything will be entirely different. Why?

3. The exponential factor applies mostly to technology, particularly in the area where target detection becomes next to total and destruction technologies that negate targets will be as near to total also. This has implications for capital items of all kinds. Battleships went out decades ago because they became too vulnerable to PGT missiles. Similarly, in time, submarines will become obsolete as technologies for underwater and seabed detection are perfected (as they will be). Already the deep seabed can be photographed from above surface in detail. This will be done in real time before long when there will be no hiding place for subs. Indeed it is getting to the stage where there will be no point in warfare other than low-level capabilities to protect frontiers, for quasi-police operations, and the containment of contagion. The time is coming when for the major powers assured mutual destruction will be just that. If they choose conflict notwithstanding there is no outcome that could benefit Australia, and we should not be involved in the first place. Nor should we seek to equip ourselves for an engagement at that level - which would be beyond our means and capabilities anyway.

4. What are the low-level contingencies that we should legitimately and realistically anticipate and prepare for until these absolute technologies arrive? Political instability in the region - i.e. the northwest, northern and northeast arcs above and around us - will endure and possibly develop. Worst cases would be PNG (and West Papua) and secessionist movements in Indonesia itself. Only in the former might we have a direct role. In the latter it would be a matter of dealing with any extended repercussions (as distinct from involvement).

5. A requisite, affordable force structure would comprise a core force of air and maritime power to operate as a deterrent against external state actors: two dozen F-35 fighter aircraft at most, some frigates, and 50 or so missile patrol boats for surveillance and interception around our coasts, together with a logistical capability for the rapid transport of military units, minesweepers, survey vessels and an amphibious landing platform. The exact characteristics
of these is for others to assess. The force should amount to a composite whole, within reasonable cost, bearing in mind that it should be designed and commissioned for low-level, national contingencies, not as auxiliaries for major conflicts. We don't need formed armies as such. Instead, apart from specialist air and naval personnel, manpower should be based on the concept of marines on the one hand and special forces on the other.

6. Basic peace-keeping and rescue capabilities, on previous lines, will remain a requirement regardless of new technologies as they affect armed combat.

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