POLICY ANALYSIS ASPI

ASPI AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Assessing the Defence Update 2007
by Rod Lyon

12

10 September 2007

Since its release on 5 July, the Australian Government's Defence Update 2007 has provoked an interesting debate. Although in his release of the document, Dr Brendan Nelson pronounced it to be the 'last nail in the coffin' for the Defence of Australia doctrine, a number of commentators have claimed that the doctrine is still alive and well—and living on pages 26 and 27 of the Update, no less. Where one commentator, Greg Sheridan, has described the Update as a seminal document in Australian strategic policy, others have claimed that the basic contours of that policy are still determined by the Defence White Paper from the year 2000. And where some analysts have seen the Update as articulating a coherent world view, others have seen only election-year rhetoric, designed to wedge Labor and shore up the government's credentials in the security arena.

The debate suggests either that the Update really is 'all things to all people', or that readers are reading it as though it is. But in another sense, it is intriguing that we're having such a debate at all. Defence Updates are a relatively new form of official document. They are very much the invention of this government and, at least initially, they seemed intended to supplement rather than to supplant the broader principles of strategic policy that the White Paper had set forth. But as time has gone on, the government's interest in the medium of the Update has increased. The Updates have grown in size. The PDF files of the three Updates available from the Defence Department's website provide a gross indicator of that expansion. The 2003 Update file downloads 28 pages, the 2005 Update 32 pages, and the 2007 Update 65 pages. So is it still true that the Updates merely supplement rather than supplant earlier thinking? Or have the Updates become a vehicle for the breaking of new theoretical ground?

A direct comparison of the White Paper 2000 and the Defence Update 2007 does suggest a number of important conceptual shifts. The changes are most clearly seen in comparing the first two-thirds of the Update (pp.1-39) with the earlier document. The principal areas of change include:

- the view of globalisation
- the understanding of 'use of force'
- and the depiction of Australian interests.

Let's start with the issue of globalisation. When White Paper 2000 discusses the phenomenon of globalisation it essentially tells a story of globalisation's benefits. In the Executive Summary (at p.viii) it states that globalisation and US primacy 'help strengthen global security and promote…developments that align with Australia's interests and values.' This judgment is rehearsed in the substantive body of the text. The White Paper recognises (at p.15) that globalisation's benefits are limited by a variety of factors—the primacy of nation-states, on-going regionalism, and the possible reversal of globalisation itself in a deteriorating security environment. But it does not see a 'dark side' to globalisation.

The Defence Update 2007 treats globalisation differently (see pp.13-14). Here, interconnectedness definitely has a negative side. Globalisation 'brings potential security threats closer to us'; it 'speeds up the impact and significance of existing and new threats, shortening response times and increasing uncertainty.' It 'can help the spread of extremist terrorism and diseases such as avian influenza.' In brief, 'a more integrated world...magnifies the range and number of potential threats and the strategic effect of events, including some distant ones, on Australia's security.' This shift in our view of globalisation is important, and has much to do with how we see our possible role in global-level engagements.

The two documents also have different things to say about the use of force. In the White Paper 2000, it is possible to see clearly the contours of an academic debate that was popular in the late 1990s. That debate concerned whether or not major war was becoming obsolete. Michael Mandelbaum and others were a part of that discussion in the IISS's flagship journal, *Survival*, in 1998-9. So the White Paper considered the argument that force might be a declining factor in international relations, and that 'new military tasks' might have an increased salience in future Australian strategic planning. The White Paper, in the end, opted for a prudent realism, concluding (at pp.9-10) that 'we need to maintain a capable defence force, that is trained and equipped to meet the demands of conventional wars between states.'

The Defence Update 2007 has nothing to say in relation to the academic debate about force being a declining factor in international security. At p.16 it talks of 'the changing nature of how force can be used to bring about political goals.' The attacks of 9/11 are described as 'unconventional warfare at its most violent', and terrorism is judged as capable of having 'strategic effects.' In this view about the changing use of force in the 21st-century security environment, the Update concludes that 'the ADF increasingly will be called on to fight irregular opponents', even though conventional dangers will remain.

Thirdly, the two documents have different things to say about Australia's strategic interests. The White Paper gives a 'concentric-circle' portrayal of Australia's interests. It says at p.29 that 'we have strategic interests and objectives at the global and regional levels', but that 'we need to allocate our effort carefully.' A judgment —emphasised in the Executive Summary at p.x—is that 'highest priority is accorded to our interests and objectives closest to Australia.' The structure of Australian strategic engagement subsequently outlined in the White Paper has a distinctly 'layered' look: the Defence of Australia is our highest priority, then the immediate neighbourhood, then

Southeast Asia, then the broader Asia–Pacific, and global security comes last on the priority list.

The depiction of Australian interests and priorities in the Defence Update 2007 does not follow this pattern. There is a still a substantial endorsement of homeland security in the document (in particular at pp.26-7): the defence of Australia is described as a 'fundamental' task, and the immediate neighbourhood is still described as a 'focus' of our attention. Within this 'paramount area', we might often have to think of ourselves as a 'leader' rather than a mere 'contributor' to security. But at other points, the document seemingly disowns the concentric-circles model. It notes (at p.28) that 'Australia's national interests are not spread uniformly across the globe, but neither do they decline in proportion to the distance from our shoreline.' At p.25 the Update argues that even to have a secure Australia, our strategic policy must aim as not just security at home, but also favourable economic conditions, and 'a benign international security environment.'

What is the cumulative effect of these three variations between the White Paper and the Defence Update? I think it is substantial. For the White Paper, global security was benign because of two favourable trends: globalisation and US primacy. That meant there was less need for Australia to be an active participant in global-level security missions. In terms of use of force, the most likely threat to Australia was still from conventional armed force attack. And since our most important interests were close to home, our most strategic task would essentially be our ability to defend the sea-air gap to our north against just such a conventional threat.

But for the Defence Update, that logic doesn't hold. Globalisation is not simply a benign force. So we can't assume that the drivers at the global-level will always pull in a direction favourable for Australian security. The use of force arena has now expanded to include the creative use of force by non-state actors, and they are using it in ways that can have strategic effects. So we can't assume that the most likely first-order challenge to our security will be a conventional one. And since our interests aren't prioritised in a neat set of concentric circles, we also can't assume that we defend our most important interests by staying close to home. In short, the Defence Update 2007 tells a story about a different world to the one which informed the White Paper 2000, and in doing so it implies a considerable repositioning of Australian strategic policy in the post-9/11 world. In many ways it is the culminating document of the three Updates, all of which pull in a similar direction—away from the orthodoxy of the White Paper.

This repositioning of Australian strategic policy is also evident in two behavioural indicators. The first is the use of the Australian army in several distant overseas missions. In the White Paper 2000, an argument is made (at p.52) that ground forces are less likely to be deployed in support of Australia's 'wider interests' than are air and naval assets. The use of ground forces on distant missions, in fact, is essentially limited to lower-intensity operations: peace-enforcement, peace-keeping and humanitarian missions. But the deployment of Australian ground forces into distant combat zones since 2001 suggests that this argument is no longer a compelling one.

The second behavioural indicator is in relation to capabilities. A theme that runs quite strongly through Chapter 5 of the Defence Update 2007—the chapter which provides an update on capability—concerns the need for the ADF to have the capability to operate 'a long way from Australia for substantial periods' (to use the phraseology on p.49). The notion of force projection underlines much of the description of capability acquisition outlined in the chapter. And that idea sits oddly with the 'capability goals' outlined for the various services in Chapter 8 of the White Paper 2000, and the force structure priorities outlined in Chapter 6 of that document. The Prime Minister reinforced the need for a 'more expeditionary Australian Defence Force' when he spoke to the ASPI Global Forces conference on 5 July. In terms of strategic behaviour, as well as in ideas, the caravans seem to have 'moved on' from the White Paper.

At this point, it is worth pondering briefly two questions. Firstly, if the government wished to reposition Australian strategic policy, why did it not simply commission a new White Paper? And secondly, now that it has reached the position that it has with Defence Update 2007, can a new White Paper be far away? In answer to the first question, I think there are two possible answers. One, this government is essentially a pragmatic government, and so is possessed of a certain reluctance to engage in strategic theorising. Two, government ministers—like most others—were initially genuinely uncertain, both about what the strategic consequences of 9/11 might be, and about how long those consequences might last. The sudden expansion in size of the latest Update, however, suggests that they are now a little more comfortable with that on-going condition of strategic uncertainty.

The answer to the second question, about whether a new White Paper can be far away, may depend on the outcome of the 2007 election. Labor has said that it wants a new White Paper, and even the Coalition government, if returned, is probably now in a position where it could produce a new theoretical framework for Australian strategic policy more easily than might have been the case a few years ago. Labor's disagreements with the government's security agenda so far seem specific rather than general, but it is too early to conclude that a new era of bipartisanship has emerged in relation to Australian strategic policy. Still, what is now likely is that a forthcoming White Paper, produced by an incoming government of whatever stripe, will look different to the one produced in 2000.

About the Author

Dr Rod Lyon

Dr Rod Lyon is the Program Director, Strategy and International, with ASPI. Rod was most recently a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Queensland where he taught courses on conflict, international security, and civil-military relations. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. He previously worked in the Strategic Analysis Branch of the Office of National Assessments between 1985 and 1996. As a Fulbright scholar in 2004, he was a visiting research fellow at Georgetown University in

Washington DC, researching a project on the future of security partnerships in the post-September 11 environment. He was appointed to the National Consultative Committee on International Security Issues in April 2005.

About Policy Analysis

Generally written by ASPI experts, **POLICY ANALYSIS** is provided online to give readers timely, insightful opinion pieces on current strategic issues, with clear policy recommendations when appropriate. They reflect the personal views of the author and do not in any way express or reflect the views of the Australian Government or represent the formal position of ASPI on any particular issue.

ASPI
Tel + 61 2 6270 5100
Fax + 61 2 6273 9566
Email enquiries@aspi.org.au
Web www.aspi.org.au