

## **Spanner in the defence works**

James Brown

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As you'd expect during this election year, the defence white paper contains a shopping list of big-ticket announceables: an expanded fleet of Super Hornet fighter aircraft for the air force, replenishment ships and patrol boats for the navy, and the promise of new fighting vehicles for the army.

All welcome news for military chiefs concerned by the lowest levels of defence expenditure in 75 years. But fighter aircraft and ships need complex logistical systems behind them and the white paper provides little detail on how new platforms will fit into Australia's military strategy. Modernising Australia's Defence Force and military strategy for the Asian century will need more than a few big equipment purchases.

This white paper makes a much more sophisticated strategic assessment of Australia's region than did Kevin Rudd's in 2009. Perspectives on China are more nuanced and moderate. There's an important change in military strategy too. Rather than preparing for an invasion that few serious defence analysts or bureaucrats expect, the white paper addresses the possibility that a hostile power in the Indo-Pacific "might coerce or intimidate others through force or the threat of force". To guard against this, Australia requires a credible defence force with a "visible domestic and regional force posture".

A key pillar in this is air combat capability. The white paper sees "emerging advanced air combat and air defence facilities within the region" because of the growing economic power of Asian countries and the accessibility of advanced manufacturing. Where once it was easy for Australia to maintain a strategic edge based on defence technology, now that edge is slipping.

An advanced fighter fleet is needed so that the Royal Australian Air Force can control the northern approaches to Australia and strike against adversaries.

Because of the delays in developing the Joint Strike Fighter, the government has prudently decided to invest in an additional 12 electronic warfare equipped Super Hornets. That decision will cost approximately \$1.5 billion, likely to be spread creatively over the forward budget estimates. This will result in a more complex and costly fleet of mixed aircraft than defence planners originally anticipated.

The back-end systems and logistical networks to support this fighter aircraft fleet are concerning. Bare-base airfields in the north, from which these aircraft would operate, were built with less than six days fuel supply in storage. A Defence Force Posture Review completed a year ago concluded that Defence's supply network in the north has serious deficiencies, particularly when it comes to the delivery of fuel. At RAAF Base Scherger in northern Queensland, delivery is hampered by a road network that would likely fail during the heavy rains of the wet season.

Fighter aircraft need explosive ordnance too, and lots of it should they ever need to conduct high tempo combat operations. But Australia's main bulk explosive ordnance depot is 3000km south on the shores of Port Philip Bay.

In any event, last year's Defence Capability Plan outlines that stocks of bombs and bullets are dangerously low. Alone among major military spenders, Australia has no fixed air defence sites either by which it might defend the airfields our new jets will operate from. And this defence white paper

makes no decision on building the ADF's fleet of unmanned aircraft, which might better surveil the waters of northwest Australia.

Similar problems exist in the Royal Australian Navy. The government commitment to purchase new replenishment ships is sound, but the larger concern is that the navy is critically short on engineers to run and maintain them. And problems loom as the navy moves to operating a more complex fleet with large amphibious ships and air warfare destroyers.

The ADF is increasingly a web of interconnecting technological systems, each dependent on finely tuned logistical networks. A delay in the delivery of one defence program has multiple flow-on effects in others.

Three years ago the government pledged to spend more than \$100bn modernising the ADF. The actual spend to date has been less than \$18bn and many critical programs have been deferred.

So while the white paper has plenty to say on big-ticket military capabilities like fighter aircraft and submarines, it is less frank on how the overall modernisation of the ADF is tracking. Particularly when it comes to how weapons platforms will be used in the event of conflict.

A credible defence force depends not just on fast jets and ships, but on the less sexy sustainment systems that support their operation. This white paper doesn't provide a lot of certainty on just how the ADF would perform if it ever had to go to war in the Asian Century.

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James Brown is the military fellow at the Lowy Institute.