

Terrorism fight takes back seat in rise of the Asian century

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NATIONAL SECURITY

There has been a quiet shift in policy focus, with defending the region now the priority, writes Hugh White.

IN LAUNCHING the Federal Government's new Defence Update yesterday, the Prime Minister and his Defence Minister were keen to proclaim their emancipation from the policy precepts of their Labor predecessors. But when you look at the document itself it is clear a quiet policy counter-revolution has been under way.

Two visions of strategic reality have been contending for the soul of Australian defence policy since the September 11 attacks.

On one side has been the view that September 11 changed Australia's strategic situation fundamentally, and the key role of the Australian Defence Force would be to fight alongside the US against terrorism, and the focus of our interests would be the Middle East.

On the other side is the view that, momentous though September 11 was, it has not changed everything. Australia's security still depends more on what happens in our own region, and the most important job of the Defence Force is to defend Australia and help stabilise our neighbourhood.

Both visions are still there, side by side in the latest update. But one side is clearly getting the upper hand. The most striking thing in the paper is the way that, despite passages about the war on terrorism and the importance of the Middle East, most focus and attention is given to what it calls Australia's "area of paramount defence interest" and the need to be able to operate independently there to defend the continent and reinforce regional stability.

This area includes, according to the update, "the archipelago and the maritime approaches to Australia to our west, north and east, and the islands of the South Pacific as far as New Zealand". This is "where Australia must lead", it says, and that means having forces ready to operate independently.

Elsewhere, further from Australia, the update says Australia needs only to "contribute".

It also draws the obvious conclusion that Australian defence policy needs to give the highest priority to making sure we can look after our own neighbourhood. Deployments to the Middle East, though important, take lower priority.

This will disappoint those who hoped the Howard Government would finally rid itself of the legacy of the past 40 years. The former defence minister Robert Hill, was among those who thought that September 11 marked the moment for a revolution in strategic policy.

He was strongly supported by those who endorsed the Bush doctrine and the invasion of Iraq, and by people in and around the army who felt a policy revolution would work to their service's benefit.

They have been battling against a strong current of history. Since the late 1960s, when the old forward defence posture sunk in the paddies of Vietnam, defence policy under Liberal and Labor governments has focused on increasing Australia's capacity to operate independently in the region. And this was reaffirmed by the Howard Government in its 2000 defence white paper.

The policy revolutionaries tend to see this as too narrow, often claiming that it limits Australia's defence objectives to defence of the continent itself. But that has been a misrepresentation. Australian governments have always acknowledged that we had interests and responsibilities beyond our shores, and needed forces able to protect them.

But the policy which has evolved over the past 40 years did say that, however we defined Australia's wider interests, the core responsibility of government and the most important role of the Defence Force was to defend our own territory.

That is why it was called the "Defence of Australia" policy.

This principle is explicitly reaffirmed in the update, which says "it is the Government's policy that our armed forces must be able to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries".

The update also follows the 2000 white paper in identifying a number of factors in Australia's immediate neighbourhood, the wider Asia-Pacific region and beyond that require Australia to pay more attention in coming years to our ability to protect wider interests.

Here the most interesting passages concern the future of relations between the region's main powers - the US, China, Japan and India. The update speaks of the stresses that are being imposed on regional stability by the rise of China and India, and the transformation of Japan into a normal strategic power. It also identifies the risk of miscalculation, especially over an issue such as Taiwan.

These are indeed the issues that pose the biggest risks to Australia's long-term security. For almost 40 years - since Australia started to aspire to a measure of defence self-reliance - our region has been in a remarkable period of peace and stability. Now, as big new powers rise in Asia, the tacit understandings that have underpinned that peace are starting to erode. Relationships such as that between the US and China need to be remade to reflect the new realities of power in the "Asian century".

There is every reason to hope this will happen smoothly, but if it does not, Australia will suddenly find itself in a much more dangerous world - one in which today's worries about terrorism, serious though they are, will look rather minor.

Defence policy must deal in such risks. If this risk eventuates we will be glad that the new Defence Update tilted the way it did - towards a robust, regional, realistic vision of Australia's strategic future.