

Defence update's hidden depths

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Since no nation threatens China, former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld once asked, why such growth in military spending? No Asian government has put such a question so indelicately to Australia. But if one does, it will be directed to the 2007 defence update for answers.

This document, launched by Prime Minister John Howard last week, includes a generally sound analysis of Australia's security outlook and some useful explanation of the country's evolution into a busy military power. It thus eases the wait for a real root-and-branch defence white paper to replace the one issued in 2000.

Yet the update amounts to less than meets the eye. It seems as much about reminding the voting public how seriously the government takes security as about signposting changes in the way Canberra worries about the world.

The previous update 19 months ago offered broadly similar assessments and prescriptions about essentially the same security challenges. Put starkly: the world is a troubled place, with Islamist terrorism, fragile states, nuclear weapons, rising powers, new ways of war and the certainty of further surprises. So we're building strong and flexible forces, partnerships and an even tighter US alliance to cope.

Any weight this update puts on the Middle East or strategic partnerships is a shift in emphasis, not a revolution in thinking. Whatever the fuss about the Defence Minister Brendan Nelson's "war for oil" remark, energy has long been a reason to seek a secure Persian Gulf. And despite political gloating about burying the "defence of Australia" doctrine, geography remains a major determinant of force structure and spending priorities.

But papers like this are not meant solely to disclose new ideas. They let a country explain how it translates the threats it sees into the defence force it seeks, while hopefully convincing others of its benign intent. These are good reasons for this update, given the 10.6 per cent leap in the defence budget and orders for destroyers and "strategic projection" transport ships.

It takes rare political and diplomatic alchemy for a government to impress its people with military strength while convincing the neighbours that this is good for them too. This update carries messages and omissions which, in some capitals, could raise as many questions as they answer.

It clarifies that Australia must be able to "act decisively" in the newly termed "area of paramount defence interest", without too finely stating the boundaries beyond the inclusion of a certain "archipelago" and "the maritime approaches to Australia". Little wonder that Nelson was straight off to prearranged talks in Jakarta, Beijing and New Delhi.

The update confirms that Australia's security remains dogged by a familiar anomaly of probability and cost: tens of billions of dollars earmarked for ships and aircraft to retain combat superiority in a region where no conventional military threat is deemed likely in the foreseeable future.

Instead, frequent deployment contingencies will probably arise in stabilisation, counterinsurgency, reconstruction and relief. The policy directions confirmed in the update say little about consolidating or enhancing skills and knowledge for such missions. This should be a priority for the army, though without undoing its recent gains in protection and mobility.

The update sheds much light on the purpose of many of Australia's new capabilities. For example, it outlines the new transport ships' troop-deployment, stabilisation and humanitarian roles. The destroyers, meanwhile, are described as allowing the navy to operate "freely" in the "paramount" regional waters. Their ability to carry defences against ballistic missiles is mentioned; their possible strike weapons are not.

Such selectivity underlines that the update is a hybrid animal, asked to perform more tricks than it can manage. It seems a full assessment of how Canberra sees the world, yet as a public text it pulls punches. It is a scorecard of national security achievements but not the shortcomings. There is no acknowledgment of the failure to appreciate until recently how open-ended Australia's commitments to Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and Solomon Islands would become.

Any effort to clarify the reasons for Australia's growing military clout is welcome. But nobody should assume or pretend that a public document that touches on the most sensitive matters of diplomacy and national security is ever going to tell the full story.

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