

## **Muddled report leaves gaps in our defence**

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P. 8

Kevin Rudd has a dilemma. He is a perceptive analyst of international affairs and he understands that China's rise is set to change Asia. But he is reluctant to unsettle voters by explaining to them clearly what that means for Asia's stability, for Australia's security and for the kinds of defence forces we may need.

The defence white paper that Rudd delivered on Saturday reflects his dilemma. It raises the right questions but does not give clear answers or bold decisions. It may help to begin the debate about Australia's strategic future but does little to resolve it.

Even by raising the right questions the white paper makes a useful contribution. It brings the focus of Australia's defence squarely back to Asia, where it belongs.

It recognises that Asia will be transformed by China's rise. It follows the 2000 white paper in identifying Australian strategic interests throughout the Asia-Pacific that could be threatened as Asia changes, and it broadly understands that air and naval forces are vital to protecting them.

But the Government appears ambivalent and even muddled about what all this means in practice and what Australia should do about it. It is muddled about the future of American power. In some places the white paper says the US will dominate Asia until 2030 or beyond, but elsewhere it says that economic power is the foundation of strategic power and predicts that China could overtake the US economically as soon as 2020, which clearly suggests the opposite.

It is muddled about whether China's military build-up is threatening or legitimate. One paragraph says it is natural for China's military reach to grow with its economy. The next says China's neighbours should worry if its reach extends beyond Taiwan. It is muddled about whether Australia's forces need to be able to protect us from China's power in future and, if so, how quickly that needs to be done.

One passage suggests that Australia can rely on the US to defend us from China; another says we should rely on our own combat forces. In some places the Government suggests that we would have 10 years' warning before we had to face such risks and could build new forces if necessary to respond. In others it says these threats could arise much faster than new capabilities could be built.

Finally, the white paper is muddled about how far to refocus the Australian Defence Force on future risks of major-power conflicts and how far to stay focused on the kind of stabilisation operations that the ADF is busy doing right now. In places it plays down Australia's willingness to support the US in the Middle East, while in others it reaffirms that support.

In some passages it even seems to suggest that Australia would use armed force to prevent internal instability in Indonesia; surely just a mistake. However, it leaves no doubt that Rudd sees Australia playing just as big a military role in stabilising our smaller neighbours as did John Howard.

All this uncertainty in the way the white paper describes Australia's strategic environment and objectives leads inevitably to problems in deciding what forces Australia needs and when. The eye-catching announcements about big increases in naval forces -- doubling the submarine fleet from six to 12 and replacing the Anzac frigates with destroyers double their size -- suggest a decisive response to new threats.

But in fact nothing will happen for a long time. For example, it seems likely (as far as we can see from a document very short on such detail) that it will be 25 years or more before Australia's submarine fleet grows beyond six and probably another 10 years -- until the mid-2040s -- before we get to 12. Obviously the Government is in no hurry to respond to new and more demanding strategic circumstances, but much of its own analysis suggests it should.

And the decision to invest even more of our scarce defence dollars in big surface ships goes dead against the arguments that the white paper makes about how the operating environment in Asia will change in future decades.

Warships are useful in low-level conflicts, but against the advanced maritime forces we see growing in Asia today they will be simply too vulnerable to be cost-effective.

Meanwhile the army has been overlooked. This white paper sensibly rejects the idea that military priorities should swing sharply towards the land forces needed for stabilisation and peacekeeping operations. But it goes too far the other way and risks leaving the army too small to fill the tasks expected of it in places such as East Timor and Papua New Guinea.

In fact, for all the talk of a bold new approach to defence, the policy announced at the weekend mostly just confirms the plans for the future of the ADF that the Government inherited from its predecessor. The same goes for the budget. This white paper leaves the pattern of defence funding where it was set by Howard, at least until next week's budget. It therefore assumes that Australia can remain a militarily potent middle power on the edge of a growing Asia in which our relative economic weight is shrinking fast, without spending more of our wealth on defence. That is a heroic assumption.

To make it credible, the Government has foreshadowed huge efficiency savings in defence. Such savings are undoubtedly there to be made, but only by a government with the political will to make tough and unpopular decisions in marginal seats. Don't hold your breath.

Of course these are all hard issues, and the Government is trying to deal with them at a difficult time. But it would have been possible to answer the big questions about our future defence policy more clearly than the Government has done here.

It is possible to explain clearly how China's growth changes Asia and raises our strategic risks without necessarily posing a threat of direct attack. It is possible to explain clearly what that may mean for the US role in Asia, for our US alliance and for our place in the region.

It is possible to explain clearly how Australia may need to use force to protect our interests. And it is possible to design a force we could afford that would give Australia the strategic weight of a middle power in the Asian century, if that is what we want. All this still needs to be done, but it will have to await the next defence white paper.

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