Conceptualising ‘Defence of Australia’ in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The term ‘Defence of Australia’ should represent the broad strategic concept of defending Australia against external threats—as a nation state within a rules-based international order. However, since the 1970s, the term has also been synonymous with an operational doctrine aimed at achieving the self-reliant defence of continental Australia ‘without relying on the combat forces of allies’. This narrower interpretation of ‘Defence of Australia’ aimed to focus the ADF’s mission and force structure around the core task of defending continental Australia; it also moved away from the previous policy of expeditionary ‘forward defence’ that had prevailed since the Second World War, which included military contributions to regional collective security arrangements in Southeast Asia.

Towards the turn of the 21st century, however, the strategic environment saw an increase in global military interventions that included Australia conducting multiple expeditionary deployments. Consequently, Defence policy-makers were required to make further compromises as to whether the ADF should be primarily structured for the ‘self-reliant continental defence’ or ‘expeditionary forward defence’ of Australia. Thus after 40 years of evolving Australian defence policy, there remains validity to Thomas Millar’s 1971 observation that ‘there is a tendency to polarise policies between ‘forward defence’ and ‘fortress Australia’.

This article argues that the ‘Defence of Australia’ concept should return to its broader strategic origins by conceptualising the term as representing a spectrum of defence policy options that range between ‘self-reliant continental defence’ and ‘expeditionary forward defence’. It identifies four enduring factors that influence Australia’s defence policy settings within this spectrum of policy options. These include protecting Australia’s sovereignty; the impact of Australia’s geography; the limitations of Australia’s resourcing capacity for ‘self-reliance’; and the effects of the prevailing strategic environment on defence policy options.

Discussing these four factors will both demonstrate how they influenced evolving conceptions of ‘Defence of Australia’ throughout Australia’s history, and how they will continue to shape Australia’s defence policy settings into the future. The proposed concept for a broader interpretation of ‘Defence of Australia’ as a spectrum of policy options ranging between ‘self-reliant continental defence’ and ‘expeditionary forward defence’ is illustrated at Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptualising ‘Defence of Australia’ as a spectrum of policy options
The notion of sovereignty

When considering the fundamental principles of 'Defence of Australia', it is essential to begin with the notion of sovereignty. The ability to protect and defend sovereignty is a core function for any government. Sovereignty underpins the international order whereby the 1945 Charter of the UN underwrites international law. It also represents equality among nation states and the 'territorial integrity or political independence of any state'.

Importantly, Australia has 'the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs'. However, it was not until the 1987 Defence of Australia White Paper that sovereignty received befitting treatment with regular references to protecting Australia’s sovereignty, suggesting that Australia’s notion of sovereignty in relation to ‘Defence of Australia’ appears to have been underdeveloped until the late 1980s.

The relationship between sovereignty and evolving concepts of 'Defence of Australia' can be traced to Australia’s origins as a British colony. Prior to Federation in 1901, the defence of Australia’s colonies remained under the purview of the British Empire. Australia first moved towards assuming sovereign control of its own defence with the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900. The Constitution empowered Parliament to make laws regarding ‘the naval and military defence of the Commonwealth’ and that ‘the Commonwealth shall protect every State against invasion’. The Defence Act 1903 then formally established the Defence Force to ‘protect Commonwealth interests’ both domestically and offshore, effectively demonstrating that Australia had progressed both its own sense of sovereignty under the Commonwealth while developing the mechanisms to defend it.

The relationship between sovereignty and ‘Defence of Australia’ did not fully evolve until after the Second World War. Stephan Frühling highlights that Australia’s ‘independence from Britain was a century-long process’. Prior to World War 2, Australian forces deployed offshore to support British Imperial defence. Australians still felt equally British, where threats to the Empire were threats to Australia. Not until World War 2 was there a ‘pronounced and consistent ... effort by Australian governments to see Australian forces employed in a way that reflected the priority of strategic objectives as seen from Canberra’.

This shift was evidenced in 1941 when Australia demanded that units of the Second Australian Imperial Force be returned from the Middle East to defend the Australian homeland. In the years that followed, Australia increasingly made its own decisions about its defence policies, including the political costs and benefits of military contributions such as to Korea, Malaya and Vietnam. However, Australia was also forced to assume responsibility for its own defence in the late 1960s. British forces had withdrawn ‘East of the Suez’, while the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ called for America’s allies to accept greater responsibility for their own defence. By the late 1970s, Australian defence policy was increasingly ‘self-reliant’ and reflected a stronger nexus between sovereignty and ‘Defence of Australia’.

The final piece connecting Australia’s sense of sovereignty to its defence, however, was the maturing sense of national identity. Not only was the Australian government ‘obligated to develop a self-reliant defence’ but the Australian public now demanded it. The 1987 Defence of Australia White Paper captured this fact, stating that ‘Australians have a right to expect that their nation is able to defend itself.... That is at the core of nationhood, and has long been an Australian aspiration’. This sense of nationhood and sovereignty, which had evolved as a central tenet of Australian defence policy, remains enduring both today and into the future.

Australia’s geography

Next to sovereignty, Australia’s unique geography is another enduring factor influencing concepts of 'Defence of Australia.' As the world’s only island continent, defending Australia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity seems an impossible task. Although rich in resources, Australia is sparsely populated and has jurisdictions covering over 10 per cent of the Earth’s surface. Australia’s prosperity is correspondingly reliant on a global, sea-based trading system whereby security of sea lines of communication is essential.
It can be argued, therefore, that Australia’s geography presents vulnerabilities to its defence due the expansive scope of national interests and obligations. However, Australia’s relative isolation and maritime geography also provide strengths. Apart from the Japanese threat during World War 2, defence policy documents have consistently assessed that no country has the capability or intent to undertake a sustained invasion of Australia.\(^{19}\)

Importantly, such a threat could be expected to take sufficient time to develop that forewarning is likely. Rather, small-scale low-level raids and attacks against Australia’s territory have historically been assessed as the more credible threat.\(^{19}\) Accordingly, Australian defence policy has generally assessed that Australia’s unique geography presents vulnerabilities to its broader national interests such as economy and trade, while also providing strengths in its direct defence against invasion.

It is noteworthy that perceptions on exploiting Australia’s geography for its defence have been shaped by two key examples. Firstly, Australia successfully exploited the archipelagic nature of its northern approaches during the Second World War to both halt the Japanese advance south and to liberate New Guinea in 1943. A joint allied maritime strategy was employed to isolate and defeat Japanese forces through a series of sequenced amphibious operations—albeit under US command.\(^{20}\) Conversely, the Japanese aerial bombings against Darwin and midget submarine attacks in Sydney also demonstrated that an impenetrable defence of Australia was likely an impossible task.

Secondly, analysis during the period of ‘Confrontation’ with Indonesia concluded that interdiction of hostile forces within Australia’s approaches provided the best defence against any lodgement of forces on the Australian mainland.\(^{21}\) These two experiences demonstrated utility in employing maritime strategy to exploit Australia’s unique geography, hence the prevailing requirement for naval and air capabilities to defend the ‘sea-air gap’, a feature of Australian defence policy that endures today.

The broader debate, however, remained as to what defence policy settings best leveraged Australia’s geostrategic strengths. Unfortunately, this generally induced a binary choice between ‘expeditionary forward defence’ and ‘self-reliant continental defence’.\(^{22}\) After the experience of World War 2, it is unsurprising that Australia adopted a ‘forward defence’ policy. The policy exploited regional collective security treaties and the stabilising presence of the US as an allied nuclear power. As such, Australia contributed military forces with a focus on keeping both the US and UK regionally engaged. However, the ‘forward defence’ policy was no longer tenable once those countries reduced their regional commitments in the late 1960s, forcing Australia to maximise its capacity to defend itself unaided.\(^{23}\)

To improve ‘self-reliance’, Australia prioritised its ability to defend the northern approaches without allied assistance. This evolved into a strategy of ‘defence-in-depth’ that was later captured in the 1987 Defence of Australia White Paper.\(^{24}\) Frühling highlights that ‘defence-in-depth’ underpinned Australia’s newfound ‘self-reliance’ in defending itself. It included a focus on naval and air capabilities to defend the ‘sea-air’ gap and provide strike capabilities against regional enemy bases. Army units were also moved to Darwin along with the construction of a ‘bare air base network across the north’ and early warning radar capabilities.\(^{25}\)

It is evident then that as Australia sought increased ‘self-reliance’ in its defence, the importance of leveraging Australia’s geostrategic advantages likewise increased in importance. Geography remains an enduring influence on conceptions of ‘Defence of Australia’ and will undoubtedly continue to do so into the future.

**Australia’s limited resourcing capacity**

Australia’s unique geography and small population contribute to the third enduring factor influencing conceptions of ‘Defence of Australia—Australia’s limited resourcing capacity for ‘self-reliance’. Put simply, Australia lacks the resources to autonomously develop and maintain an ADF capable of independently defending the Australian continent and its territories, while also protecting its national interests further afield.\(^{26}\)

This fact further exacerbates policy debate regarding a binary choice between ‘expeditionary forward defence’ and ‘self-reliant continental defence’. Notwithstanding, two enduring policy considerations have emerged that continue to shape contemporary defence policy settings regarding resourcing. First is that
Australia’s defence is underwritten by major power alliances. Second is that the ADF should be primarily structured for the core task of the self-reliant defence of continental Australia. These two issues will now be considered in turn.

Since colonisation, Australia has underwritten its defence through alliances with major Western powers. As outlined earlier, Australia’s defence was initially provided by the British Empire whereby Australia contributed forces to wider Imperial defence. However, the fall of Singapore during World War 2 and Britain’s need to prioritise the war against Germany ended Australia’s reliance on the Empire for its defence. Instead, Australia turned to the US to underwrite its security, including halting the Japanese advance south during World War 2. The US alliance was formalised in 1951 with the ANZUS Treaty, providing Australia extended nuclear deterrence and assurances of US support should Australia be overtly attacked.

However, this did not extend to indirect confrontation as occurred with Indonesia during the 1960s. Nonetheless, Australia has contributed to ‘burden-sharing’ with the US since 1951, including Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Although some commentators argue that Australia’s contributions have been disproportionately small in comparison to US contributions, Australia nevertheless enjoys significant benefits from the US alliance. This includes privileged access to science, technologies and intelligence that provides Australia with significant defence savings. Australia continues to mitigate the resource costs of self-reliance through underwriting its defence with the US alliance, while also enjoying privileged access to advanced technologies not available within Australia.

Australia could not, however, solely rely on its allies to underwrite its defence and so developed concepts of ‘self-reliant’ defence of Australia from the 1970s. As early as 1972, the McMahon Government observed that ‘Australia’s would be prudent not to rest its security... on the military of a Western ally in Asia’. Consequently, the challenge of resourcing self-reliance forced policy-makers to reconsider perceptions about defending Australia, culminating in the 1987 Defence of Australia White Paper.

Three key themes emerged. Firstly, self-reliance required a prioritisation of Australia’s vital interests, a challenging task in the absence of a direct threat. This included identifying what required defending rather than simply what to defend against. Hence the concept of a capabilities approach to planning and the ADF’s ability to defend continental Australia in the ‘sea-air’ gap, while maintaining a regional ‘technical edge’. Secondly, in the absence of a direct threat, greater emphasis was placed on the concepts of warning, contingency and expansion. This included structuring the ‘force-in-being’ for credible low-level contingencies and allowing for expansion should a major threat develop.

Finally, structuring the ADF for self-reliant defence of continental Australia would not preclude deploying the ADF beyond the immediate region, thereby still providing the Government with options for military contributions further afield. Australia developed a conceptual framework for ‘self-reliant’ defence of Australia that maximised the efficient use of its limited resources. Importantly, the premise of structuring the ADF for the continental defence of Australia remains a consistent feature in contemporary defence policy.

The prevailing strategic environment

The final enduring factor influencing conceptions of ‘Defence of Australia’ is the prevailing strategic environment. Indeed, it is the strategic environment that will shape how notions of sovereignty, Australia’s geography, and limitations in resourcing capacity will interact to determine Australian defence policy settings. In short, defence policy is a ‘product of its time’. For example, during World War 2, Japanese expansionism presented Australia with its only real experience of a direct threat to sovereignty and territorial integrity.

It is unsurprising then that Australia committed considerable resources to its defence. This included the service of almost one million of its seven million population and a spike in defence expenditure to almost 35 per cent of GDP—an amount more than double that of the First World War and some seven times more than any other period in its history. Since the end of the Cold War, however, defence spending has slipped to an average of under two per cent of GDP. Hence, there is an enduring correlation between Australian perceptions of the strategic environment and defence policy settings, resourcing and force posture.
Pursuing this point, there is further correlation between the prevailing strategic environment and where Australia has positioned itself on the spectrum between 'expeditionary forward defence' and 'self-reliant continental defence'.

After World War 2, for example, Australia adopted the policy of 'forward defence'. This posture was closely linked to the prevailing strategic environment that saw the emergence of the Cold War, the rise of Chinese communism and communist expansionism, the decolonisation of Southeast Asian nations, and the gradual contraction of the British Empire. As such, Australia's 'forward defence' posture aimed to keep the US and UK regionally engaged in regional collective security treaties, else Australia faced being isolated in a potentially-hostile strategic environment. It can be argued, therefore, that the 'forward defence' policy was a product of the post-World War 2 strategic environment.

Conversely, the narrower interpretation of self-reliant defence of continental Australia gained traction as a result of the post-Vietnam strategic environment. By the mid-1970s, the British had mostly withdrawn 'East of the Suez', and US failures in Vietnam exacerbated US disengagement from the region initiated under the 'Nixon Doctrine'. However, a détente had emerged between the US and Soviets, and communist expansionism did not prevail despite the failures of Vietnam.

By the late 1970s, Australia's strategic environment was otherwise benign. Combined with domestic Australian perceptions regarding failures in Vietnam, an adversity to expeditionary deployments contributed to the recalling of most Australian forces forward deployed. This saw the end of the era of 'forward defence', and Australia entered what has been narrowly termed the 'defence of Australia' era due to the prevailing strategic environment post-Vietnam.

The most recent shift in the strategic environment that continues to shape contemporary conceptions of 'Defence of Australia' has been the post-Cold War era. Despite the 1987 Defence of Australia White Paper prioritising 'continental defence', Australia instead entered a period that saw over two decades of regular expeditionary deployments in support of regional and global military interventions. These included deployments to Fiji, the Persian Gulf, Bougainville, Rwanda, Somalia, East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan.

This growth in expeditionary operations was in part a response to the 1989 end of the Cold War, which left the US as the unipolar world power but also saw a spike in intra-state conflicts and increased global willingness for security intervention. Australia's own region experienced instability, culminating in 1999 with Australia leading an intervention in East Timor (INTERFET). INTERFET was a 'notable success that gained Australia regional and global recognition'. It also preceded regional stability becoming a core task of the ADF. Thus the post-Cold War strategic environment challenged conceptions of both 'expeditionary forward defence' and 'self-reliant continental defence', whereby the ADF was increasingly expected to undertake both tasks.

The contemporary challenge facing conceptions of 'Defence of Australia' then is the ability to provide an 'expeditionary forward defence' capability while also prioritising a force structure founded on 'self-reliant continental defence'. The 2000 Defence White Paper attempted to address this challenge through further harmonising the two conflicting concepts into somewhat of a hybrid policy framework. The concept defines Australia's defence to reflect five geographical priorities, commonly referred to as the 'concentric circles'.

These priorities include defending Australia and its approaches; security within the immediate neighbourhood; security of Southeast Asia; stability in the wider Asia-Pacific; and global security. The framework aims to 'see the ADF evolve into a flexible instrument designed to achieve a wide range of different functions beyond the defence of Australia'. Frühling also suggests it represents 'the current bipartisan orthodoxy of Australian defence policy'. The framework offers both a practical and acceptable compromise between 'self-reliant continental defence' and 'expeditionary forward defence' and represents an important evolution in contemporary conceptions of 'Defence of Australia'.

**Conclusion**

The analysis in this article has identified four enduring factors that determine how the term 'Defence of Australia' has been and will continue to be conceived. First is the notion of sovereignty. The Australian
government is obligated to provide for Australia’s defence and the population has a right to expect it, so the requirement to defend Australia’s sovereignty will continue to prioritise sovereign defence as an enduring core task of the ADF.

Secondly, Australia’s unique geography is a constant in shaping Australia’s defence policy options, whereby leveraging the geostrategic advantages of Australia’s northern approaches will continue to shape the capabilities and posture required for Australia’s defence. Thirdly, Australia lacks the resources for autonomous self-reliance. Hence, the requirement to underwrite Australia’s security with major allies will continue to be critical in mitigating Australia’s limited resource capacity.

Finally, the prevailing strategic environment remains the ultimate determinant as to where Australia positions its defence policy within the spectrum between ‘expeditionary forward defence’ and ‘self-reliant continental defence’. In the absence of a direct threat, the ability to protect national interests further afield seems prudent. However, there is also little doubt that in the face of a direct threat Australia would prioritise continental defence above all else, as occurred in World War 2.

It can be concluded then that after a century of evolving Australian defence policy, the term ‘Defence of Australia’ continues to oscillate between the two distinct interpretations that Millar identified in 1971. At one end of the spectrum is the broader interpretation of ‘expeditionary forward defence’, whereby Australia’s broad national interests are defended well offshore, generally in support of a larger allied force. At the other is the narrower interpretation of ‘self-reliant continental defence’, focused on structuring the ADF for independent continental defence of Australia while still providing options to government for military contributions further afield.

However, changes in the strategic environment over recent decades have increasingly found Australian governments wanting greater flexibility to achieve both, leading to greater compromise between the two seemingly binary policy options. It is for this reason that the term ‘Defence of Australia’ should return to its broader strategic origins by conceptualising the term as representing a spectrum of defence policy options that range between ‘self-reliant continental defence’ and ‘expeditionary forward defence’.

In doing so, the term ‘Defence of Australia’ will better reflect that natural oscillation between forward and continental defence that will ultimately be determined by the prevailing strategic environment in the 21st century.

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Notes

1. This is an edited version of a paper, with the same title, submitted by the author while attending the Australian Command and Staff College in 2014.


5. Figure 1 conceptualised and arranged by the author. Background map sourced from Australia Defence Association at <http://ada.asn.au/assets/images/maps/Australia-OrthographicProjection-small.png> accessed 15 May 2015.


7. UN, Charter of the United Nations, Chapter 7, Article 51.

8. Commonwealth of Australia, The Defence of Australia 1987, Department of Defence: Canberra, March 1987, paragraphs 1.5, 1.7, 1.10, 1.34, 2.11, 2.43 and 2.50. There is no mention of sovereignty in the Strategic Basis series of Australian defence policy documents between 1947 and 1973, and only vague references within the 1976 papers.


37 Thomson, ‘Funding Australian Defence’, p. 258.
38 Thomson, ‘Funding Australian Defence’, p. 238.
41 Andrew Carr, ‘Australia as a Middle Power’, in Dean et al, Australia’s Defence, p. 44.