Submission to the 2015 Defence White Paper

Chris Rahman

Executive Summary

This submission establishes why a capable Defence Force is needed by outlining enduring features of the nature of international politics:

- It remains an arena of competition and conflict, and even is war prone
- Bad things happen, including surprises and the genuinely shocking
- Uncertainty abounds

It also explains why the character of the current strategic environment is not permissive of assumptions of peace and prosperity, due to both global and regional challenges:

- Great power competition is growing
- Russia and China, in particular, are dissatisfied powers
- The United States remains global strategically preponderant but the international system is under significant strain
- Australia’s interests are inexorably tied to the maintenance of the existing international system built around liberal principles, and we should contribute materially to its defence
- In our own region China demonstrably is the primary source of instability and threat
- Our region is undeniably a maritime one, and protection of the principles underpinning the international system as applied to the sea, such as freedom of navigation, must be protected

It concludes by re-stating the benefits to Australia of pursuit of a maritime strategy capable of deterring or defeating threats as far from our own shores as possible. The force structure already outlined in previous white papers is largely sound, but needs to be fully implemented if the maritime strategy is to be effective.

The Nature and Character of the International Political System

Nature

The Defence Issues Paper states that the answer to the question “Is war a thing of the past?” is now rather more obvious than it was at the turn of the century (p. 9). However, it would only be more obvious to those who suffer from the journalistic malady of “presentism”: the extrapolation of today’s international political and

---

1 Senior Research Fellow in Maritime Strategy and Security, Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong. The views expressed in this submission are the author’s own and do not necessarily represent those of ANCORS or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.
strategic environment into the future with little expectation of change. As anyone with just a modicum of schooling in strategic history would know, the persistence of the social phenomenon of war is inherent in the international system, or more broadly, within or between organized political communities whether or not they take the form of the archetypical modern state.

The objective of politics is power, and in the international arena, the influence over one’s external environment that power brings. Unlike the domestic politics of a democratic state, where political power is moderated by electoral politics and the rule of law, the international system is not so governed: there is no world government, no international equivalent of an electoral mechanism for allocating or negotiating political power, and no rule of law standing above politics to manage problems within the system. This is not to suggest that the international system is wretchedly chaotic or that states are constantly required to maintain a war footing for fear of the next imminent major threat. But it does explain why war is a constant feature of the international system. Competition and conflict are inherent features of politics, and in the absence of moderating mechanisms with in-built policing powers, the turn to organized violence or strategic coercion to settle disputes simply is an international fact of life. It is in the very nature of the politics of security: war and the coercive application of strategic power have been ever present phenomena across the history of human civilization. That fact pertained just as strongly in 2000 as it does in 2014, even though the specific character and identity of external threats are not constant over time. There is no convincing evidence today, as there was none in 2000, nor has there been at any time over the at least 2,500-year course of relatively well recorded human experience, that the scourge of war has been, or can be, consigned to the history books.

Moreover, uncertainty – particularly about the unknowable future, which is, like war, another inescapable problem for policymakers – is another condition of international political life. The same can be said of surprises or shocks to the system. Negative events for security or stability that are unexpected and usually largely unpredictable in precise detail in advance in ways that allow for prevention of the shock in question, in actuality occur regularly. Take the following selection of candidate examples since the dying days of the Cold War: Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the terrorist bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa, the 9/11 attacks and the consequences, Russia’s invasions and annexations of parts of Georgia and the Ukraine, the global financial crisis, and the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of the irregular rabble force of Sunni Islamist extremists commonly known as “Islamic State.” Not all surprises have negative consequences: for example, the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the more positive geopolitical events for international security during the twentieth century. It is also often easy to argue in hindsight that particular events should have been foreseen or could have been forestalled. Such arguments miss the point. The salient problem being identified is that for good or ill, political and strategic shocks to the system are relatively commonplace.

Conflict, competition, coercion, the phenomenon of war, uncertainty, and shocks to the system simply are inherent in the very nature of world politics. Arguments frequently made that particular events could have been avoided, often using the dubious hindsight of the future historian, fail to acknowledge the more important, broader point: such problems are generic, in-built features of the international
environment for policy and strategy makers. Such are the empirically grounded, albeit perhaps depressing, assumptions that need to underpin any review of defence policy and strategy.

**Character**

Unlike the unchanging nature of politics on the world scale, the character of the international security environment changes constantly, sometimes more frequently than at others, depending on political, strategic, economic, technological and other contexts in any one era. The particular character of the current international security environment, especially as it affects Australia, is neither one of imminent major strategic peril (although, as noted above, we don’t know today what shocks may occur tomorrow), but nor is it one in which we should hold too much confidence in our expectations for a peaceful and prosperous future, as we attempt to peer into the unknowable void that is the mid-century time frame required by planners of the future Australian Defence Force (ADF) in a Defence white paper process. Potential challenges that already are identifiable from current contexts can be discerned at both the global and regional scales.

**The Challenges Posed by the External Security Environment**

**Global Challenges**

One leading current difficulty relates to the rise, decline and dissatisfaction of great powers in the system. These dynamic relationships have been in a period of flux since the end of the Cold War, characterized by the rise of China; the stuttering rise of India; the decline of Japan; despite some appearances to the contrary, the overall continued decline of Russia; the stagnation and likely decline over time of the geographical area we know as western Europe (to be sure not a polity, despite the best efforts of mostly unelected and unaccountable “Eurocrats,” but important on the world stage nonetheless); and the less confident leadership of a United States somewhat chastened by questionable strategic choices and performances during the two most recent administrations, a stumbling, unreformed economy and dysfunctional Congress. Yet the (self)perception of these powers and their interrelationships may be the most problematic aspect of great power intercourse at present, particularly when it comes to the continued dominant role of the United States, and the preference of certain powers for a return to a form of great power multipolarity, whether based upon well founded expectations or wishful thinking.

Russia and China, in particular, may hope for a diminished global role for a supposedly relatively declining American super state, and an international status on a par with that of Washington. Their respective ambitions are unlikely to be fulfilled. Whilst trends are apt to change, the medium to longer term prospects for American power are at least as healthy, probably better, than those even of China. The portents for the underlying aspects of American power, including military power, its technology base and culture of innovation, its continued cultural and even ideological attractiveness, demography, and even its economy, with its strong resource base, including growing energy independence, seem to suggest, cumulatively, comparative strength on a global scale that other great powers are unlikely to be able to match. This expectation is clearly a positive factor for Australian security and should inform the way we shape policy, strategy and the future ADF.
There is a related problem to great power machinations but one less well understood, however, which also has direct consequences for Australia. Australia is a beneficiary of, and active contributor to, the current world order organized around Western liberal principles. The international system became truly global only in the eighteenth century, symbolized by the global nature of the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), and “ordered” to the extent that that is possible by the leading sea power of the day, Great Britain. British leadership managed to defeat or deter illiberal threats to global order variously posed by French, Russian, and German authoritarian regimes. Its role serendipitously was usurped by another English-speaking liberal sea power of even greater reach and influence in the mid twentieth century: the United States, which led the liberal world’s efforts against both German and Soviet Russian twentieth century totalitarianism.

U.S. preponderance in, and its implicit ordering role across the different geographical realms that make up the global commons, have been essential to the (relatively free) trade so important to global economic growth, to system protection, and thus also to wider international confidence in system stability. However, the system itself is threatened by any attempt to undermine the central U.S. role in it. System stability requires ordering power, and power, as is often observed, abhors a vacuum. Only through the deliberate application of fungible multidimensional capabilities of the world’s sole superpower can international confidence, and the prosperous and peaceable intercourse derived from it, be maintained. An ordering role cannot be generated by UN committee, for real power resides in the major states of the international system, not its organizations. Nor is the intellectually attractive but impracticable idea of a concert of powers especially feasible, and not solely because a concert could hardly be a club of equals given global U.S. preponderance. Even more important is that two members of any possible concert increasingly reject certain essential principles of the liberal order, such as freedom of navigation in the case of China (discussed further below), and administrative arrangements for an open, largely internationally uncontrolled, internet.

Australia must understand that its stakes in the maintenance of a liberal world system are of the highest order of importance; simply put, it is essential to our own security and national interests. There is no viable alternative to the existing order; indeed, the most likely actual alternative would be a system which is far less orderly, and thus less economically prosperous and inherently more dangerous. The actions of certain previously named great power “stakeholders” not only increasingly demonstrate a lack of international responsibility, but positively seek to undermine the system. One of the most delicate geopolitical challenges for U.S. leadership given the dual aggression of Russia in Europe and clumsy assertiveness of China in Asia, is to not overreact to the extent that those two recalcitrant powers align together against U.S. and Western interests, and the international order as a whole. Australia’s most appropriate response is not, however, as some domestic commentators would have it, to act excessively pragmatically as if we were a disinterested party unwilling to cause offence to destabilizing parties, but to continue to actively support the extant international system through our alliance and coalition activities, as well as our broader diplomatic initiatives. An Australian grand strategy committed to system maintenance and a serious Australian contribution to it, including explicit ADF support to the deterrent effect generated by our primary ally, is a responsible position to take in defence of the very system that we rely upon.
The problem of violent Islamist extremism is serious, albeit one which is of lesser consequence than great power challenges discussed above. The crisis within Islam arguably has been brewing for a century; it may take decades more to dissipate. There may be times when, as at present, modest ADF commitments may be made to coalition campaigns to combat a near-term threat to national or alliance interests, or to regional order in different parts of the world. In the main, though, much of the effort over time is likely to be non-military. Serious threats that do occasionally arise most likely can be dealt with by elements of the extant force, and should not be a primary driver of ADF development.

Nor should so-called non-traditional security concerns drive the future shape of the Defence Force. If environmental or other problems cause crises requiring an ADF commitment, then it is well-equipped to do so relative to the overall modest size of the Defence Force, whether that involves non-combat contingencies such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations, or even if the limited use of force is required. New capabilities such as the joint amphibious platforms (LHDs) and associated helicopters, and the Air Force’s improved fixed wing transport element, already are perfectly adapted to carry out such tasks.

Another enduring global challenge is financial fragility. Few of the underlying problems which caused the global financial crisis have really been resolved, and economic weakness and debt abounds. Even Australia would struggle to effectively respond to a repeat crisis now that the surplus has been spent and deficit dominates. The implications are daunting: Defence spending will be excessively constrained due to ongoing deficits, yet should another crisis hit, such is the global fragility that currently exists, that conflict, and thus demand for ADF contributions to restore stability in individual failing states or regionally could rapidly expand.

**Regional Challenges**

Australia’s wider neighbourhood, the Indo-Pacific super-region, poses possibly greater challenges than does the global security environment as a whole. It is a vast area, geographically home to many political and strategic disputes. Most importantly, it is the centre of great power competition, largely focused on the threat posed by an unsatisfied, non-status quo China to adjacent countries and their friends and allies, and to those states dependent upon stability in, and trade with, Asia. Whilst the two conflicts involving one or more nuclear-armed powers, India-Pakistan in the west, and the Korean peninsula in the northeast, are perhaps the most inherently volatile and potentially dangerous, it should not be forgotten that China’s conflicts with other great powers also have a nuclear dimension.

The Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime region, whose seas carry a large proportion of world, and Australian, trade. It is the region’s maritime disputes that pose real risks for Australia: our trade could be directly disrupted or our economy indirectly negatively affected; our ally, friends and security partners could be attacked or otherwise drawn into armed conflict; or the region more generally destabilized. In fact, the latter risk is already, in practice, readily apparent. The problem, however, needs to be approached with clear vision, not myopically or euphemistically. Whilst it is true that there exist a number of different disputes involving a range of parties, the common factor to destabilization at sea is China. Absent China, for example, the
South China Sea disputes would assuredly be more manageable, if not necessarily easily soluble. Thus, in terms of strategic risk, it can be misleading to euphemistically state that there exists a South China Sea problem, or an East China Sea problem, or even a Taiwan problem. In truth, clearly and succinctly stated, what the region is experiencing is in fact a China problem.

It is fair to say that none of China’s maritime claims have a strong basis either in the historical record or international law (which is not to assume that other parties necessarily have valid claims either, especially in the South China Sea). But irrespective of such arguments, China’s highly coercive behaviour at sea (and in the air) is slowly changing the regional geopolitical status quo. Beijing unquestionably is in expansionist mode throughout East Asian seas, but in such a clumsy fashion that countervailing coalitions of states are beginning to form. Australia’s rapidly strengthening defence relationship with Japan, in the context of the trilateral dialogue also involving the United States, invariably is part of that process. This should be viewed as a positive Australian contribution to the regional order on which we depend, through the strengthening of deterrence of Chinese adventurism.

China’s attempts to restrict freedom of navigation in its claimed exclusive economic zones and overflight of those zones is directly contrary to international conventions to which Beijing is a party. In practice, China is attempting to establish new international norms which would extend coastal state sovereignty over seas and airspace far beyond what is currently acceptable under international law. This is one of the ways by which China’s actions in East Asia link directly to world order, as these important regimes are global, not regional. If they are undermined regionally, they will be undermined globally, severely diminishing the extent of the global commons. It needs to be recognized that the U.S. alliance system, globally and regionally, is still a maritime one, heavily dependent upon access to the seas, as well as to the other commons environments of international airspace, space and cyberspace. The ability of the United States and its allies to both defend and exploit those commons strategically underpins the extant world order. This is unassailably a direct strategic interest for Australia.

It certainly is possible that Australia could be drawn into an armed conflict involving China, whether in response to a direct attack upon a close friend and fellow democracy such as Japan, or less directly, should U.S. forces be attacked whilst fulfilling America’s own alliance commitments. If such an attack were to occur in the western Pacific, it would likely trigger an expectation of an ANZUS Treaty commitment on the part of Australia. These risks are worth running if aggression is to be deterred, or defeated, should deterrence fail. The 2009 white paper established the central problem of China as well as it could without being gratuitously provocative. Predictably, Chinese, and the pro-China lobby’s pressure ensured that the issue was fudged in the 2013 iteration to the point of misleading the public. That was regrettable, for it is essential in a liberal democracy that defence policy speaks openly and honestly about threats to our national interests. Economic relationships may be important, but fundamental political and strategic interests should trump mere commerce every time.

It is also worth noting that unlike the portents for America over the medium to longer term, those for China may be mixed at best. A myriad of domestic problems from
political rigidity and lack of the rule of law and a range of freedoms, fissiparous ethno-territorial tendencies in large western regions of its non-Han empire, endemic corruption, debt and economic stagnation, environmental degradation, bad demography, and so on could wreck China’s continued rise. If one engages with the metaphor of the dynastic cycle solely for illustrative purposes, it is not at all clear where on the cycle China currently is situated. The future could just as easily bring decline as it could further ascent.

Implications for the ADF

The 2009 white paper established a strong case for an expanded maritime capability, which would allow the joint force to operate throughout the vast are of the Indo-Pacific from the western Indian Ocean through the Eastern Archipelago to Northeast Asia. That was a sensible and realistic approach to our geostrategic circumstances and, despite the diplomatic fudging of 2013, that white paper continued the commitment to the substantive force structure improvements set out in 2009.

Maritime strategy is at its most effective and beneficial when it is designed to be able to meet and defeat threats as far from national territory as possible. Australia’s maritime geography is sympathetically configured for the design and implementation of effective maritime strategy. This will require that the posited force of long-range and high-endurance platforms capable of operating throughout the Indo-Pacific region actually is constructed. The one significant limitation to the plan remains the Air Force’s contribution, given the relatively short range and limited endurance of its combat aircraft. For the joint force to be fully effective there seems to be an assumption that access to friendly and useable air bases sufficiently close to likely theatres of operation will be available. That may be an heroic assumption.

Other challenges for the ADF remain the successful integration of new capabilities currently under construction, plus selection of a new submarine design. There is one point to be made on the latter problem. Whichever design ultimately is chosen, it must be of sufficiently long range and high endurance to suit our unique requirements, and it must be built around the U.S. combat system. As with all major advanced combat platforms, space and intelligence-gathering assets, it is politically, strategically and technologically essential that we are able to be fully interoperable with our primary ally. American systems must therefore lie at the heart of all of our most sophisticated defence needs.

Finally, a useful addition to the 2015 white paper would be an explanation of how the joint maritime force currently under development can/will be employed strategically to protect the important national interests as set out in foreign and defence policy. It would be preferable if it could outline the types of generic operations within our specific Indo-Pacific geography that the ADF should be able to conduct.