Australia’s strategic interests: it’s time to move on from concentric circles and towards South East Asia

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Australia strategic interests have been defined by the concentric circles approach since 2000, a legacy of the Defence of Australia doctrine of the 1980s. While concentric circles have given Australia the ability to acknowledge strategic interests further beyond a narrow continental defence concept, it still heavily emphasises defence of the continent as the primary determinant for force structure and capability priorities. Recent Defence White Papers have explicitly stated this. Although recent DWPs have identified regions in the 'outer' concentric circles, most notably South East Asia, as areas of strategic interest for Australia, it is unclear how these interests further from Australia’s shores are actually factored in to decisions about force structure, if at all.

Under the way that strategic interests and objectives are currently ordered, it is implied that a secure South Pacific and Timor Leste is a more important force structure determinant than the security of South East Asia. This doesn't make sense, given the far more serious contingencies and threats to Australian security relating to the security of South East Asia. South East Asia is by far the most strategically vital region to Australia's security, and intensifying tensions between ASEAN states and China threaten to destabilise this region, heightening the risk of a conflict that could draw in a US military commitment, which could then pressure Australia to commit forces to the region. The importance of South East Asia to Australia’s security is rooted in strategic geography, in that any significant military attack against Australia must come from or through South East Asia first, in order to assault across the sea-air gap to Australia’s north. There is no other viable axis of advance for a hostile force. No power can threaten Australia without warning, as it would have to be mired in a conflict involving South East Asian states to our north before it could threaten Australia directly.

Given increasingly likely and serious military contingencies in a region so vital to our security, the 2015 DWP should review our current concentric-circles prioritisation of strategic interests and consider a rebalancing of our strategic posture away from a continental focus and towards a regional approach, with an emphasis on South East Asia. This would entail Australia tying itself into the South East Asian security order, and capability-wise, would prioritise the expansion of the ADF’s capacity to project force into South East Asia above obtaining capabilities specifically for continental defence. Forward engagement and force projection into Asia firstly has the mitigation of conventional military threats in mind, but it would simultaneously allow increased flexibility and capacity in dealing with non-conventional security issues, particularly through improving interoperability and strategic trust with our Asian neighbours.

Prioritising strategic engagement with Asia would complement Australia’s long-standing policy of defence self-reliance. Increasing security ties with South East Asian partners and being a more proactive contributor to a stable regional order reduces our dependence on the bilateral US alliance for our security. It allows Australia to become self-reliant not in the narrow and reductionist sense of independently defending the continent against a future enemy, which conjures an image of waiting for an enemy to arrive at the gates. Instead, it boosts Australia’s self-reliance in protecting its
broader strategic interests in the wider region, mitigating the risk of a military threat well before it reaches Australia’s neighbourhood.

The regionalist approach does not represent a total departure from the logic of concentric circles, as it is also based on strategic geography. Instead, it represents a reshuffling of the order in which strategic interests and objectives are prioritised according to the concentric circles view, making South East Asia the most vital area of strategic interest for Australia rather than the defence of our own continent. Importantly, the capability and force structure decisions that would flow from this adjusted definition of strategic objectives would not compromise the ADF’s ability to directly defend Australia and to fulfil Australia’s responsibilities in securing our neighbourhood. Forces designed for protecting offshore interests in the wider Asian region against conventional threats would still provide a robust capacity for defending Australia’s territory and approaches if necessary. This approach would therefore be an achievable and logical evolution, not revolution, of Australia’s definition of strategic interests and objectives.