

**PERSPECTIVES**

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**A NON-PROVOCATIVE DEFENCE POSTURE  
FOR AUSTRALIA**

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## **A non-provocative defence posture for Australia**

Sam Roggeveen

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Australia finds itself in a unique historical moment. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, our major economic partner has also been either a major strategic partner or an ally of one (the UK, US and Japan). That is now changing.<sup>1</sup> In China, Australia has a major economic partner with a number of interests that are directly opposed to those of our major strategic ally, and which is rapidly developing its military capability.

The priority for Australia will be to avoid having to choose between these two giants; to keep them both satisfied in their different ways, and to defer disagreements. This is not to say we can avoid small choices, but we must avoid a breach with either country. This is probably the biggest foreign policy challenge Australia faces in the next decade or two. It is principally the task of diplomacy, but our defence policy can play a small part in meeting it.

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, territorial and historical disputes remain, but military capabilities are growing only slowly, and there is no sign of genuine arms racing. It is in Australia's interests that habits of strategic and military cooperation in South East Asia improve, and that differences do not become more pronounced through provocative arms purchases and military postures. Our defence policy can play a part in avoiding an arms build-up, by promoting a less distrustful atmosphere in the region.

To explain how Australia's defence policy can be relevant to these objectives, it is useful firstly to look at the terms in which we presently debate our military force structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, Regional diplomacy has new impetus. *Australian Financial Review* 3 April 2008 p 79: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=779>.

### *How Australia's strategic environment shapes force structure*

The kind of military force Australia designs in its new White Paper, due in the first half of 2009, will be shaped in part by our perceptions and judgments of the military threats we face. But particularly when it comes to evaluating our air and maritime capability against that of military forces in Asia, there is a tendency for the debate to calcify into rigid comparisons between our military platforms and theirs.<sup>2</sup>

The premise of such narrow debates is that Australia ought to have 'the best' air and maritime capability in our region. This is often referred to as 'the capability edge',<sup>3</sup> and it means that our military capabilities should remain superior to...well, to whose, exactly?

Australia's combat capability edge has really only ever existed against our immediate South East Asian neighbours. We've never attempted to maintain an edge against a major power, because that would bankrupt us. So our major ally does that job for us, and Australia has instead built a force that could play a supporting role in coalition with the US if it ever came to a conflict with a major power.

It might be argued that we need an independent combat capability edge in our more immediate region. After all, Australia may get involved in a conflict in South East Asia in which the US takes no part, so we need to maintain superior forces of our own.

But the economic and political trajectory of South East Asia is broadly positive, and there is little prospect of armed state-on-state combat that might involve Australia. If there were reverses or crises, these would more likely be in the form of full or partial state failure than aggressive military action. In such circumstances, the relevance of a combat capability edge in air and maritime platforms is questionable.

The counter-argument here is that the likelihood of conflict is not really the issue. After all, governments and analysts are routinely surprised by events they did not predict. So defence capability is a hedge against events that, though unlikely, would be damaging or even catastrophic for Australia if they did occur. Armed conflict against a Southeast Asian

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Fowler, *Flying blind*. ABC TV Four Corners program 29 October 2007: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2007/s2070484.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> *Defence 2000: our future defence force*. Defence White Paper 2000: <http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/wpaper2000.PDF>.

neighbour may be unlikely, this argument goes, but if we get into one, we want to be sure we win it.

That sounds logical, but it carries consequences. Most importantly, if Australia's neighbours apply the same logic to themselves, it creates the dynamic for arms racing. And why should they not apply this logic to themselves? It is unreasonable to expect that Australia can maintain a capability edge indefinitely without challenge from its neighbours. Why should Australia alone have the capability to win a conflict with a neighbour? Why would our neighbours acquiesce to permanent military inferiority?

The fact is that up to the present day, they more or less have done so, partly because it suits them, and partly because they have been unable to do much about it. As Lowy Institute visiting Fellow Ric Smith<sup>4</sup> and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Andrew Davies<sup>5</sup> have both pointed out, there is no arms race in South East Asia today, and military capabilities remain quite modest compared to Australia's. Nor is there evidence that our South East Asian neighbours feel threatened by Australia.

The feeling is mutual – Australia does not feel threatened by our Southeast Asian neighbours either. Yet Australia insists on maintaining its capability edge. Indeed, Australia has got away with defence purchases that, had Indonesia or Malaysia made them, we would have considered provocative and destabilising. Australia ordered the F-111 in 1963, and it would be very hard to argue that it has provoked any acts of regional military 'balancing', much less arms racing. But, in part, that can be attributed to the fact that regional states lacked the *means* to balance or race. With the long-term economic growth of our region – whatever the short-term disruptions of the global financial crisis – we can no longer be so confident that our capability edge will be maintained.

In North East Asia, the challenges arising from economic growth are even more daunting than in South East Asia. With the rise of China, the region is entering a period of flux, and the countries of the region have to find a way to accommodate China's rising power. This will be extremely challenging, and there's a chance it will go wrong. There are few indications, for instance, that the US is prepared to cede any influence in the Asia Pacific, which may ultimately be the price it has to pay to accommodate a rising China. Without a long-term

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<sup>4</sup> Richard C. Smith, *Asian military modernisation*. Lowy Institute Perspective, October 2008: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=904>.

<sup>5</sup> *Asian military trends and their implications for Australia*. ASPI Strategic Insight No. 42, July 2008: [http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication\\_details.aspx?ContentID=176&pubtype=6](http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=176&pubtype=6).

*modus vivendi* between these two powers, the region may instead be marked by competition and confrontation rather than cooperation.

This is not to suggest a division into two Cold War-style blocs – the region is already too economically integrated for that. But we could see higher levels of distrust between the two powers and their allies and surrogates. We are already seeing indications that the US and China are sliding into military rivalry (though there are also encouraging signs of diplomatic cooperation, such as on North Korea). A US-China relationship defined by confrontation and competition clearly carries with it a higher risk of inter-state war, including with the possibility of nuclear exchange.

That sounds a dire prognosis, given the generally benign state of the Asia Pacific, and even of the world. In fact, so peaceable are our times (by historical standards) that military conflict between major powers appears to many unthinkable. But although the Asia Pacific is enjoying growing prosperity and a sustained period of peace, human nature has not been abolished. Territorial and historical disputes that might lead to war have not been resolved, nor have regional leaders built the structures that could help stave it off. States will continue to misconstrue, miscalculate and make mistakes; and otherwise act in ways that outside observers would regard as contrary to that state's interests.

### ***Non-offensive defence theory***

The picture painted here is one of strategic uncertainty and potential danger, but with few short-term indicators that Australia's security is at risk or is being eroded. The argument made below is not that this potentially troubling regional evolution should encourage Australia to build a bigger or more capable Australian Defence Force (ADF). Nor will it be argued that Australia can afford a much smaller or markedly less capable military. The Asia Pacific is relatively calm and the chances of armed conflict involving Australia low, but defence spending is, in part, a hedge against low-probability, high-impact events.

Rather, the argument made here is that Australia could benefit from shifting its declaratory policy and force structure to a less provocative posture. That is, Australia can develop a defence posture that ameliorates the security dilemma for other states by assuring them that Australia's military capabilities do not make them less secure. It is a strategy of self-denial that would signal our reluctance and reduce our capacity to undertake aggressive military action.

This is not to advocate a policy of defeatism or appeasement against military threats to Australia. Rather, Australia can have a perfectly adequate defence capability that can deter or defeat any plausible threat, and contribute to operations with our allies, but which also helps to promote a more constructive and cooperative regional security environment.

So what is a ‘non-provocative defence posture’? It takes some elements of non-offensive defence doctrine developed among European security scholars in the 1980s, but is a less radical and more practical adaptation of that doctrine.

The central aim of the non-offensive defence school was to encourage defence strategies and weapons systems that could not be construed by the other countries as offensive and thus provocative. It argued that military strategies which deter through the threat of offensives tend to encourage surprise attacks from an adversary, because the adversary feels it needs to act pre-emptively. A more stable balance of power, it was argued, comes from an emphasis on defence of home territory rather than an ability to conduct offensives against an adversary.<sup>6</sup> If a country can defend itself but be no threat to others, the theory went, it can deter aggression rather than provoke it.

Non-offensive defence theorists thus favour a force structure biased toward weapons and tactics that will reassure neighbours through a physical inability to conduct offensives, but which also deters adversaries by demonstrating that any offensive on their part would be defeated or involve unacceptable costs. Long-range strike capabilities and power projection forces are eschewed, because these are useful mainly for offensive purposes. Instead, the emphasis is on denial capabilities such as air defence forces, inshore missile craft, coastal submarines, minefields and other static land barriers (the Maginot Line is a good historical example of what was a pretty formidable non-offensive structure). Such systems are useful for self-defence, but do not provoke fear or counter-balancing in others.

It is worth noting here that non-offensive defence theory is territorially focused, and in that sense perhaps a little dated. Wars of aggression with the aim of capturing territory are relatively rare in our time, with force (or the threat of it) often used by states to coerce adversaries rather than annex them. But the logic of non-offensive defence theory can still be applied in such cases, since states cannot practise this coercion without the physical means to do so.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Butfoy, *Ameliorating the security dilemma: structural and perceptual approaches to strategic reform*. ANU Dept of International Relations Working Paper No. 1996/1: [http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir/pubs/work\\_papers/96-1.pdf](http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir/pubs/work_papers/96-1.pdf).

However, the coercion issue also reveals the limits of non-offensive defence theory, since a state with a non-offensive force structure is vulnerable to adversaries which threaten that state's interests far from its borders. For instance, long-range naval platforms might be needed to protect a state's sea lines of communication far from its sovereign territory.

### *A non-provocative defence posture for Australia*

Non-offensive defence theory is also impractical for big countries like Australia, which would be difficult to defend with static or short-range systems alone. The long-range ships and aircraft which might be purchased purely to defend Australian territory could be seen by others as having an offensive purpose. For instance, a Royal Australian Navy landing ship that can transport troops hundreds of kilometers east and west along our coast could just as easily sail them north. The same logic applies to the airborne refueling aircraft that extend the range of the RAAF's strike fighters.

A more realistic alternative that adopts some elements of non-offensive defence could be called non-provocative defence policy. It would maintain a relatively conventional force structure, but would emphasise its non-offensive nature in declaratory policy. It would also eschew some offensive capabilities such as long-range strike platforms, and encourage high degrees of peacetime military cooperation and confidence-building with neighbours. It would rely more on perceptions to communicate benign Australian intent rather than instituting the fundamental force structure changes implied by non-offensive defence theory.

But it would involve some changes to Australia's offensive forces. In the context of the above discussion, the intention would be to maintain those elements of Australia's capability edge which are defensive in nature and are unlikely to provoke counter-measures by others. But it would circumscribe those ADF capabilities that might provoke regional balancing. I will nominate two specific force structure changes here – one concerning air power and another, amphibious capability – though there are other possible changes that could signal a non-provocative Australian defence posture.

Regarding air power, a non-provocative force structure for Australia would not include long-range strike assets like the F-111s. Nor would it seek to replace the F-111 capability once



these aircraft are retired. So Super Hornets and air-launched cruise missiles<sup>7</sup> would not have a place in a non-provocative defence posture. Nor would sea-launched or submarine-launched cruise missiles – which remain options for the air warfare destroyers and future submarine fleet – be considered. In practice it may be too late to affordably reverse the Super Hornet procurement, in which case the priority should be to focus these aircraft on air defence missions rather than strategic strike.

The two 28,000 tonne amphibious ships Australia has on order could also be seen as offensive systems. One of their ostensible purposes, after all, is to put troops ashore so that they can capture enemy territory. But as already discussed, such ships can have a legitimate place in a purely defensive force structure also. And in all likelihood, these ships will never be used in the role for which they are designed – contested beach landings are something of a military anachronism.

Instead, the amphibious ships are likely to spend their operational lives as soft-power assets, engaged in tasks like disaster relief and assisting in peacekeeping. So to facilitate this role and to further signal Australia's non-provocative military posture, the ships could be partly 'demilitarised' and treated as national logistical assets, so that they could be operationally focused on these soft-power tasks from the beginning.

Navy has the experience and know-how to operate such ships, and would use them for military purposes. But they could be operated in much closer cooperation with other government agencies and NGOs, which would have key roles in disaster relief and reconstruction operations. If possible, the detailed design of these ships should also take into account the needs of these agencies. This multi-agency approach has been adopted by New Zealand with its Project Protector naval fleet renewal, and on the upgrade of its P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft fleet.<sup>8</sup>

Another way to facilitate this demilitarisation might be to remove the bow 'ski jump' feature of the ships, designed to help fixed wing 'jump jets' take off with bigger fuel and weapon loads. Australia has no plans to buy such jets, but the fact that the ski jump is being retained sends a message that Australia wants to keep its offensive options open. Given the ski jumps are not needed, this rather unnecessarily risks creating ambiguity about our intentions for

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<sup>7</sup> *Australia chooses JASSM missiles on F-18s for long-range strike.* Defense Industry Daily 11 September 2006: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/australia-chooses-jassm-missiles-on-f18s-for-longrange-strike-updated-01966/>.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Quigley, The evolution of New Zealand defence policy. *Security Challenges*, Vol. 2 (3) 2006 pp 41-61: <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/SCVol2No3/vol2no3Quigley.pdf>.

these ships. On a practical level, it reduces the amount of deck space for helicopters, which will be valuable in emergencies or peacekeeping operations.<sup>9</sup>

Why favour a non-provocative defence posture for Australia? Again, it is not because Australia is a destabilising presence in the region or causes other states a great deal of strategic anxiety. As noted already, there is very little evidence of regional arms racing, and those states that are substantially improving their military capabilities are certainly not doing so because they feel threatened by Australia. In fact, despite occasional lapses like Prime Minister Howard's statement about regional pre-emption,<sup>10</sup> Australia's record as a regional security citizen is overwhelmingly positive.

Nevertheless, there are two reasons for arguing that Australia should adopt a non-provocative defence posture.

The first is that it would cost us very little, and could have financial, diplomatic and national security benefits. In our declaratory defence posture, it would do us no harm at all to explicitly reject the notion that Australia seeks to maintain a capability edge that allows Australia to threaten the interests or territory of our regional neighbours through our strike and expeditionary warfare capabilities. Instead, we should constantly reaffirm that we see our security *in* the region, not *from* it. That's 'cooperative security', and to be fair, we have already done a great deal to show Indonesia in particular that we take this idea seriously. But declaratory policy is the easy part. We can also adopt the modest force structure changes suggested above. Again, these need not expose us strategically, since Australia would maintain a strong, but more defensively focused, ADF.

The second reason to prefer a non-provocative defence posture is the changing power balance of our region. As already noted, Australia's offensive forces have done us little harm in the past. We've been a good regional citizen and despite our capabilities, regional countries have seldom felt anxious about potential Australian military assertiveness.

But times are changing, and that change will in some senses be unfavourable to Australia. The consequence of continued regional growth is likely to be that Australia will become a

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<sup>9</sup> It would have been cheaper to order more austere ships for the purposes I have described; perhaps along the lines of the Royal Navy amphibious ship HMS *Ocean*, which is built largely to commercial standards. But my premise here is that it is now too costly to cancel our order and buy *Ocean*-type ships instead.

<sup>10</sup> John Howard, Interview on ABC Radio's AM program, 2 December 2002: <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s738657.htm>.

relatively smaller strategic power in the process. If we can encourage a norm of strategic cooperation and non-provocative military postures now, it will benefit Australia in times when we have less influence.

### ***Conclusions***

One of the major challenges for Australian foreign policy is to avoid a breach between the US and China, because that could force Australia to choose between them. The most serious breach imaginable between China and the US is war. The chances of war between the US and China are not high, though there remains the obvious flashpoint of Taiwan. South East Asia also has its share of territorial disputes and tensions, though there is as yet no regional arms race.

Australia does need to maintain military capabilities for these or other regional contingencies. For the unlikely event of war with China, the aim should be to maintain a force that can provide a useful contribution to the US. Our submarine fleet meets that need adequately (though there is clearly an urgent requirement for improved crewing), as it can make a substantial contribution to US-led operations. Unlike our small ground and air forces, Australia's submarines would add real strategic weight. What is more, an emphasis on submarines rather than surface ships, ground forces or air forces also helps reinforce the message of non-provocation advocated here. Submarines provide a negative capability – they can deny war aims to an adversary – but they have less utility in pursuit of an aggressive purpose (particularly if they are not armed with land-attack missiles).

Nor do we need to greatly expand our capabilities to deal with threats closer to home. If, in future, there is real improvement in South East Asian military capability (as opposed to the trophy purchases of high-end weapons being made recently), we will have time to respond.

So Australia's security environment is not such as to require a major expansion of our defence forces. But this essay has argued that our defence policy can do more than just protect Australia from threats – it can actually play a small part in shaping the security environment for the better. Clearly, our capacity to influence the military balance in North East Asia will be far less than that in our immediate region. But the entire region will be more stable if all countries develop less provocative military postures. Australia can be a leader in that field, and can encourage a similar posture from others.

The regional security environment is right for such a development, in that it is neither openly hostile nor completely benign.<sup>11</sup> In circumstances of high international tension, adopting a non-provocative defence posture such as that advocated here might actually invite aggression by signaling weakness. Where no military tension exists (such as between Australia and New Zealand), a non-provocative posture is pointless. But in its relations with the Asian region, Australia finds itself somewhere in between these two extremes. Our region is marked by suspicions (in some cases deep) but not outright hostility, which means there is room to shape the regional security environment to emphasise cooperation rather than competition.

Prime Minister Rudd said in his recent National Security Statement<sup>12</sup> that this should be a priority for Australian diplomacy, and his Asia Pacific Community initiative<sup>13</sup> seems to be an attempt to seize that opportunity. A non-provocative defence posture can complement it by ameliorating the security dilemma and thereby building trust rather than suspicion.

This argument should not be oversold – Australia’s military posture has had only a small impact on regional attitudes in the past, so a non-provocative Australian defence posture would not lead regional countries immediately to follow suit. But even if Australia remains alone in adopting such a posture, the risks to our security are negligible, and we could improve our soft-power capabilities in the process.

If Australia combined such a posture with its drive to improve regional security architecture, the chances of other states adopting less provocative military postures could improve. Of course, building a cooperative security culture in the region is primarily the work of diplomacy, and the National Security Statement contains some encouraging language on the growth of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to help that effort. Australia could send an early signal of its non-provocative defence posture by taking the money for that expansion out of the defence budget.

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<sup>11</sup> Butfoy, *Ameliorating the security dilemma*, pp 22.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Rudd, *The First National Security Statement to the Parliament*, 4 December 2008: [http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech\\_0659.cfm](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0659.cfm).

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Rudd, *It's time to build an Asia Pacific Community*. Address to the Asia Society AustralAsia Centre: [http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech\\_0286.cfm](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0286.cfm).

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*Sam Roggeveen* was a senior strategic analyst in Australia's peak intelligence agency, the Office of National Assessments, where his work dealt mainly with nuclear strategy and arms control, ballistic-missile defence, North Asian strategic affairs and WMD terrorism. Sam also worked on arms control policy in Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs, and as an intelligence analyst in the Defence Intelligence Organisation. He has written for various Australian publications on US and Australian politics, terrorism, international relations theory, ethics, soccer, cricket, PG Wodehouse and Michael Oakeshott.

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