

Strategic interests and Australian grand strategy
by Rod Lyon and Hayley Channer

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The recently published National Security Strategy (NSS) is meant to set the context for the forthcoming Defence White Paper, scheduled to make its appearance later this year. But on one key point the NSS falls short. While it provides a good coverage of Australia's broad security interests, it might usefully have been more expansive about Australia's strategic worldview. Perhaps ministers wanted to leave that topic for the Defence White Paper to address—both of the previous Defence White Papers included a chapter entitled 'Australia's Strategic Interests', so it's a reasonable assumption that this year's will too. Or perhaps the government believes that the issue is already settled. When the Defence Minister spoke at both ASPI and Lowy functions in August last year, he specifically addressed the topic of strategic interests, rehearsing the earlier formulation of those interests without substantive criticism. If so, that's a pity, because the formulation of strategic interests sketched out in the 2000 and 2009 Defence White Papers is limited, reactive, and heavily defence-oriented.

Defence writing teams naturally gravitate towards a definition of strategic interests as those interests which are to be secured substantially or primarily through the use of armed force. That pulls them towards a narrow understanding of strategic interests—an understanding further constrained by a test of practical achievability given the resource limitations of the ADF.

It's no surprise then that Australia (in the 2009 Defence White Paper) lists its 'most basic strategic interest' as defending the continent of Australia from armed attack. 'Most basic' is apparently intended to convey that this ranks as our most important strategic interest, given the language in the opening phrase of paragraph 5.7, where a secure neighbourhood is described as 'our next most important strategic interest'. The security, stability and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood, including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, New Zealand and the South Pacific island states falls under this section. Controversially, the paper says Australia has an 'enduring strategic interest in preventing or mitigating any attempt by nearby states to develop the capacity to undertake sustained military operations within our approaches'. This is a strange point: it implies we have an interest in keeping Indonesia militarily weak, when a stronger Indonesia could be of real benefit to us. And it raises a broader question—if we have an enduring strategic interest in keeping our neighbours militarily weak, why are we helping many of them under our current Defence Cooperation Program?

Beyond our neighbourhood, the White Paper also argues that Australia has an ‘enduring strategic interest’ in the stability of the broader Asia–Pacific region, from North Asia to the Indian Ocean. And finally, the White Paper identified a strategic interest in preserving an international order that restrains aggression, and manages a variety of risks and threats. The chapter in the 2000 White Paper is similar, though not identical, in its depiction and ‘layering’ of our strategic interests.

But there’s a profound limitation in seeing Australia’s strategic interests merely as ‘those national security interests...in relation to which Australia might contemplate the use of force,’ as the 2009 White Paper put it. For one thing, such an approach tempts us to invert the process—thinking first about where we might be willing (and able) to use force and then defining our strategic interests accordingly. A good example of this can be seen in Hugh White’s criticism of the 2009 White Paper for describing a stable and cohesive Indonesia as one of Australia’s ‘vital’ strategic interests. ‘The direct implication of this statement’, says White, ‘is that Australia would contemplate the use of force to support internal stability in Indonesia.’¹ So what’s the answer? For White, ‘in regards to Indonesia, while internal stability is clearly very important to us, it is not a *strategic* interest (emphasis in original).’² But surely this is putting the cart before the horse: White is backcasting, deleting Indonesian stability from our list of strategic interests because we couldn’t use force to achieve it.

A second problem with limiting strategic interests to those in which we might contemplate the use of force is that it tempts us to think that Australia’s strategic interests are coterminous with its defence priorities. Some readers might imagine that we’ve always thought about strategic interests principally in defence terms, but that’s not so. Australian declaratory policy has occasionally been bold enough to suggest a grand strategy, harnessing all the tools of national power. While over forty years old, the 1968 Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, for example, offers some crucial advice on considering the multiple elements of strategy (not just military)—advice that the authors of the 2013 DWP would do well to heed:

Para 26: We must also beware, as we discuss strategic policy, to avoid considering the problem as one of purely military significance. Strategy embraces political, economic and social objectives equally with military, and sometimes the former may be more important. There must always be a close inter-relationship between defence policy and political and economic policies.

Consistent with that judgment, the 1968 paper observed, in paragraph 27, that ‘The security and stability that our strategic interests require cannot be achieved solely by military measures.’ The 1976 Defence White Paper included a similar thought: ‘Insofar as we can directly influence developments shaping our strategic prospects, this will often be by the political rather than the military arm of policy.’³ But if that’s true, what’s the point of defining our strategic interests merely in relation to the military arm of policy?

Worst of all, our current approach contains nothing that might be described as proactive ambition. The overall effect is to portray Australia’s national strategic interests as narrow and reactive, when it would be better to be broad and proactive. On that point, it’s worth bearing in mind Walter Russell Mead’s definition of US grand strategy—that it’s the US project for the world.⁴ In a similar vein, Australian grand strategy should be understood as the Australian project for the world. That would be a departure from past practice, in part perhaps because Australian grand strategy has been devalued into a set of military planning guidelines.

Obviously, grand strategy needs to provide guidance to the likely roles and missions of the ADF. But governments pursue national interests and national objectives and use all instruments at hand to do so. They don’t pursue a separate series of military interests, diplomatic interests, police interests or even trade interests. National strategic interests are not something that Australian policymakers should

think about only in the narrow, defence-oriented manner that they have adopted in recent years.

Beyond force

We might avoid the trap that strategic interests and strategic objectives are all about the use of force in either of two ways. The first would be to broaden our understanding of the ‘use’ of force, so that it includes broad, shaping activity as well as direct conflict. This is not an entirely facetious exercise: many of the best theorists of the use of force will argue that force is both more commonly and more importantly used in a gravitational manner (to provide a steady background context for international affairs and a shaping influence) than in a direct manner (to kill people and break things). That expanded understanding of the utility of force helps stretch our conception of strategic interest, but still doesn’t give us all we want, omitting as it does all of the other levers of power the government holds.

The second, and better, way of escaping the trap is simply to say upfront that strategy is about how we pursue the world we want, and not just about the use of force. That means thinking about strategic interests in a more proactive, aspirational way. It allows us to identify the stability, integrity and cohesion of Indonesia, for example, as one of our strategic interests, even though we don’t contemplate securing that interest primarily through the use of force. In earlier declaratory strategy we made no bones about saying something similar about the entire Southeast Asian region. The 1968 Strategic Basis paper, for example, noted that building critical mass in Southeast Asia was Australian strategy, even though that couldn’t be achieved by the use of force.

We need to beware of a theme that is increasingly prevalent in our public debate today—that the success or failure of our strategic ambitions turns solely upon the military capacity of the ADF. In the current discussion of future numbers of submarines, for example, there’s a sense that if we don’t pass a set of tests built around defence capabilities then we’ll have failed our strategic priorities as a nation. That’s wrong. Our defence capabilities are only one of our instruments for pursuing grand strategy—and in an era of regional transformation that is neither driven by force nor stoppable by force, we’re probably back in those scenarios where the political arm of policy will be carrying more weight than the military arm.

How should we understand Australian grand strategic interests?

Unsurprisingly, there’s no consensus among Australians about what the ‘Australian project’ for the world might entail. But that’s not unusual: Mead makes the point that in the US a consensus about the ‘American project’ has been historically rare—essentially limited to the periods of the Monroe Doctrine and the Cold War. What’s more unusual is our refusal to even discuss the topic and our predilection to slide into a comfort zone in which strategy is all about force numbers.

Grand strategy focuses our attention on the world—on its potential make-up and not merely the task of managing its current and looming problems. It puts aside concepts of self-reliance and Fortress Australia. It aims at lofty ambitions. It implies proactive shaping policies rather than reactive hedging ones. It defines a role for us in relation to others, and not merely a role in relation to ourselves.

If we think of strategy in the broader sense, Australia’s most important strategic interest is not defending our continent against armed attack. That might certainly be our most important defence interest, but—on the basis of the argument sketched above—we should try to avoid making our strategic interests merely overlay our defence ones. Rather, our most important strategic interest would be something grander: it would be in generating and sustaining a world whose make-up is characterised by the presence of many other liberal, democratic states and whose

order is shaped primarily by Western values and the active engagement of the world's primary powers. In this vision, international values, norms and conduct would be similar to Australia's and the world's great powers would actively support adherence to these. A democratic, liberal, prosperous Australia would not endure long in a world where there were no other democratic, liberal, prosperous states. And a global reassurance order would not be stable in a world where great powers had no buy-in to the global system.

What can Australia do to promote such an objective? At the metaphoric level, perhaps we should think of our role as gyroscopic, rather than motor-related—a role that relates more to guidance than to motive power. But regardless of whether that's a helpful way to think of our future role, we should make clear that our grand strategic objectives lie 'upstream', towards greater cooperation and an enhanced reassurance order, and that what we do 'downstream', hedging against a more conflict-prone region, is exactly that—our hedging position and not our strategy.

Notes

- 1 Hugh White (2009) 'A wobbly bridge: strategic interests and objectives in *Force 2030*', *Security Challenges*, 5, 1: 21-29, at 25.
- 2 White, 'A wobbly bridge', at 26.
- 3 Defence White Paper 1976, Chapter 3, paragraph 17.
- 4 Walter Russell Mead (2004) *Power, Terror, Peace and War* (New York: Alfred A Knopf).

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