

THE  
**CENTRE  
OF GRAVITY**  
SERIES

**CONTINGENCIES AND  
WARNING TIME**

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## ABOUT THE SERIES

The *Centre of Gravity* series is the flagship publication of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) based at The Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. The series aspires to provide high quality analysis and to generate debate on strategic policy issues of direct relevance to Australia. *Centre of Gravity* papers are 1,500-2,000 words in length and are written for a policy audience. Consistent with this, each *Centre of Gravity* paper includes at least one policy recommendation. Papers are commissioned by SDSC and appearance in the series is by invitation only. SDSC commissions up to 10 papers in any given year.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A well-established principle in Australian defence policy is that there is a relationship between level of contingency and length of warning time.
- Conclusions about contingencies and warning time drive subsequent policies about the size and preparedness of the ADF. For example, in the event of serious strategic deterioration, involving the prospect of sustained high-intensity conflict, we would expect the government to expand the ADF, and to increase its preparedness.
- Given the absence of steps towards major force expansion in the 2013 Defence White Paper, we may conclude that Australia is not in a period of strategic warning. Further, given the likelihood of continuing and severe budget pressures, the 2013 White Paper presages reductions in the preparedness of the current ADF. This implies beliefs about the warning we would get even for contingencies important to Australia that could arise in the shorter term.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- With the 2013 election now out of the way, the new government should instruct Defence to revisit the issues of level of contingency, warning time, force expansion and preparedness. This re-examination needs to reflect objective assessments of economic and military growth in the Indo-Pacific region, and the changing dynamic of international relationships. Conclusions about the level of strategic risk that follow from different levels of force size and preparedness would provide a secure basis for arguments about levels of defence funding. This would be far more persuasive than mere assertions that a particular percentage of GDP is appropriate for Australia's defence.

## The background to the policy

The idea that there is a relationship between level of contingency and warning time has been integral to Australian defence planning since the 1970s. Yet over the years the focus on this issue, and the associated ideas of preparedness, force expansion and Australia's industrial base, has been neither strong nor consistent.<sup>1</sup>

Time is often the neglected dimension of defence planning. Yet its consideration is central to practical defence decision-making. This is true for any nation that takes national security and the allocation of resources seriously. Two examples illustrate the principle. First, preparedness (that is, readiness and sustainability) can be expensive, so not all elements of a defence force are kept at short notice for operations. There will usually be a spectrum of preparedness: at one end of the scale, counter-terrorist forces able to move within hours; and at the other end, Reserve units mostly able to become operational only after months if not years. Second is the idea of reconstitution or mobilisation: when threats emerge, a defence force will be expanded and, conversely, when threats go away, as at the end of the World Wars and the Cold War, forces will be reduced. So time is an important parameter in a government's approach to defence policy, risk management, and resource allocation.

In Australia's case, the end of the war in Vietnam called for fresh thinking about defence policy. The emerging ideas of the *Defence of Australia* filled some of this gap, but there was a need also for an analytical basis from which to argue for levels of defence funding – else the prospective budget cuts at a time of evident 'low threat' would have been harsh. This led Defence to develop the concept of the *core force and expansion base*. In brief, a force-in-being would evolve which would both meet the demands of those important lesser contingencies that might arise in the shorter term, and be the base from which expansion would occur in the event of major strategic deterioration. Intelligence would be critical in assessing warning time and ensuring that expansion would be timely.

These ideas, first formally set out in the 1976 Defence White Paper, attracted a lot of incredulous and hostile comment. Yet the concepts have endured and have become embedded in the conceptual framework that guides Defence planning. The 1987 White Paper took the effort to spell out how Australia was different from 'its traditional friends and allies in the northern hemisphere': not only was there the absence of motive and intent for major conventional assault on

Australia, but it would take many years for any plausible adversary to develop the necessary levels of capability and expertise. The 1994 White Paper reinforced this central message. (The 2000 White Paper focussed more on the shorter term, and for the most part left expansion base issues as implicit.) In many respects, the 2009 White Paper continued the established approach to warning and expansion — but it also seemed ambiguous about whether Australia should start to prepare for seriously adverse strategic developments.

The 2013 White Paper continues with the orthodox approach, using familiar language and ideas. With respect to the prospect of major power attack 'we would require an even stronger ADF than is currently planned', and 'we would still expect substantial warning time ... including dramatic deterioration in political relationships'. Further 'Defence will continue to balance its finite ... resources to meet current and short-term requirements while retaining a baseline of skills, knowledge and capability as the foundation for force expansion should strategic circumstances deteriorate'<sup>2</sup>.

There is however, a new consideration in its discussion of preparedness for contingencies that might arise in the shorter term. The 2013 White Paper recognises preparedness as a 'key strategic management tool', and mentions some welcome recent enhancements to Defence's preparedness management system. But, in spite of giving an indicative list of the types of operation that the Government expects Defence to be prepared to carry out (potentially concurrently or through operations that are 'carefully sequenced'), the White Paper also states that 'adjustments to preparedness levels in particular can take effect relatively quickly compared to longer-term basing and force structure decisions'. Given the consistent tenor throughout the White Paper about constraints on resources and the need to make difficult choices, this would seem to indicate that we can expect *reductions* to preparedness, not least to free up resources for force modernisation and infrastructure development, especially in Australia's north.

In summary, over the past forty or so years, the ideas of levels of contingency, length of warning time, preparedness and force expansion have underpinned much defence decision-making and yet, in spite of the careful words in the 2013 White Paper, they have also in many respects become neglected. In the early years, attempts at mobilisation planning and the quantitative analysis of force expansion produced little of practical value—in part because there was no pressing need for such study, and any attempt at detail would have become quickly out of date. And in more recent years, the focus on current operations and the shorter term has mostly crowded out consideration of the longer term.

## Is the policy still relevant?

We now need to ask whether these ideas, conceived at a time of no direct threat to Australia and at the height of the Cold War, are still appropriate in this new *Age of Asia*. In Australia's evolving strategic circumstances, what position ought the Government to take on preparedness and force expansion?

Australia is now less remote from the global locus of economic and military growth than in previous decades. But it is also true that the tensions of, for example, North East Asia remain a considerable distance from Australia, and even the South China Sea cannot be said to be proximate. Military operations in those areas would hardly represent a major and direct threat to Australia, although we could expect to be affected by the higher levels of international tension that would result.

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On the other hand we can expect that as Asia's many and varied economies continue to develop, so too will their military capacity. This will start to undermine one of the central pillars of Australia's security: while motive and intent might well remain absent, the ability to conduct military operations against us will, over time, increase (as the 2013 White Paper acknowledges). And conventional wisdom tells us that motive and intent can change much more quickly than defence capability can be developed. Nevertheless, the difficulty of major attack on Australia would be formidable, much as has been convincingly argued in previous decades.

For the most part, the force structure plans of both the 2009 and 2013 White Papers amount more to modernisation than to expansion – least of all major expansion. There are some exceptions. Most outstanding is the decision, set out in the 2009 White Paper and repeated in the 2013 Paper, to double the size of the submarine fleet to twelve. But it is quite possible that the fleet will not reach this size until the early 2040s, if at all, and there is no discussion of comparable expansion of other ADF elements. So in the absence of arguments about strategic deterioration (or much other strategic justification), the link between the decision to double the size of the submarine fleet and judgements about warning and expansion is at best ambiguous.

In a similar way, the decision announced in the 2013 White Paper to acquire twelve electronic warfare (EW) *Growler* Super Hornets is more of a general enhancement of capability than force expansion. Given the importance of EW in modern high-technology warfare, this development is welcome<sup>3</sup>. But there is little evidence that this decision marks concerns about imminent and worrying strategic deterioration.

It is important not to be alarmist about the economic and military growth of the nations of the Indo-Pacific. And this observation does include China in its ambit. The prospect of major assault on Australia is not just around the next corner. At this stage at least, motive, intent and capability are all absent. On the other hand, the concepts of warning and expansion remain integral to the conceptual foundations of Australian defence planning. And just as the concept was important at a time of reduced defence funding following withdrawal from Vietnam, so too will it be important for decisions on funding levels and resource allocation following our exit from Afghanistan – especially given the prospect of austere levels of defence funding for the indefinite future and the need to modernise the ADF.

What about contingencies that might arise at short notice, potentially affecting the size and preparedness of the current force? When the ideas that linked warning time and level of conflict were first articulated, there were distinct limits on the military contingencies that could credibly arise in the shorter term. These limits were set by two considerations: the levels of capability that could be brought directly to bear against Australia were in general quite low; and

Australian governments took the view that Australia's broader strategic and foreign policy interests should have only a modest influence on the structure and capabilities of the ADF. This latter point was reinforced by observing that the nature of the ADF we required for our own defence would give the government of the day a broad set of options for contributing to operations further afield, and that Australia's potential contributions to such operations would be valued more as statements of political support than for their decisiveness on the battlefield. This judgement holds as much today as in previous years.

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There is an argument that such potential short-warning contingencies have now become more demanding. For example, there is the prospect of military confrontation in the South China Sea with its unresolved disputes over maritime boundaries and reefs. There is the wider question of Australia's more general contribution to regional security, especially in the event of serious tension between at least some of the ASEAN countries and China. And there is the perennial issue of ensuring that Australia has sufficient military options to keep our relationship with the US in good shape. Further, the fertile imagination can always bring forward other kinds of contingency that might affect Australia's interests: attempts to close international straits, interdiction of sea lines of communication, tension between the US and China, for example.

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But three considerations need to be kept in mind before such contingencies are factored into Defence's planning base. First, there is always the need to set priorities and to differentiate between those contingencies where we would have little choice but to be involved, and those that would be more discretionary. Into the first category fall many contingencies in the South Pacific and other areas closer to home; into the latter fall most if not all contingencies further afield. That Australia might have an interest in a turn of events is not in itself a sufficient reason to involve elements of the ADF.

Second, deeper analysis of each potential contingency is required before it should be allowed to influence the defence planning process. For example, there is a need to understand against whom or what the sea lines of communication (and focal areas) might need to be protected (and how). And any commitment that Australia might make to general regional security needs to avoid our becoming hostage to the policy settings or adventurism of other countries in issues in which we are not a principal party.

Third, the impact that such off-shore contingencies should have on ADF planning is not one for Defence to decide in isolation. To at least a first approximation, the more that a contingency is off-shore, the more it becomes a foreign policy issue, and Australia's centre of excellence in foreign policy and the international system is to be found in DFAT, not Defence. DFAT should therefore have a substantial say on the influence that such contingencies should have on defence planning. This could of course lead to the inclusion of potential contingencies in the planning base, not just to exclusions.

Related issues include the role and structure of the Reserves, and defence policy for industry. The Reserves have long been an important part of the expansion base, but recent years have seen an increased focus on the shorter term (the use of the Reserves for current operations) at the expense of the longer term. As part of a broader review of preparedness and expansion base priorities, it will be important to ensure that the balance between the shorter and longer-term roles and missions of the Reserves are appropriate.

Over the years, the study of Australian industry as an expansion base to support sovereign ADF operations has been conspicuously absent, if perhaps for understandable reasons. The last serious mention of this matter was in the 1987 White Paper, and since that time there have been radical changes in technology, the structure of defence industry (both here and overseas), and in the increased use of industry to give direct and extensive support to the ADF, including on operations. So this subject is also ripe for review.

## The way ahead

One of Defence's core responsibilities is to get the balance right between the shorter and the longer term, or at least to make recommendations on this to government, and to make clear the strategic and operational risks and consequences that attach to likely or different levels of funding. The 2013 White Paper recognises the importance of the management of such risk. But it is clear that, to live within the constrained levels of funding that are now likely, there will be a need to make hard decisions on defence capability and preparedness, for both the shorter and the longer term. The White Paper alludes to this but stops short of making the decisions.

Given the stage of the electoral cycle at which it was written (a few months before a general election), the 2013 White Paper probably went as far as it could in setting out these issues, even though it left them unresolved. However, with the 2013 election out of the way, it is important now to make progress on them. The widespread consultation involved in the drafting of this White Paper means that there is an accepted conceptual framework, agreed at senior levels across relevant Departments, within which to do so.

The onus will be on Defence to develop the case for what operations the ADF needs to be capable of, how these priorities are set by the demands of Australia's changing strategic circumstances, and the warning and therefore level of preparedness that should apply to each, including as necessary through force expansion. Such work would lead to a clear assessment of levels of strategic risk and as a major benefit the conclusions would provide a secure basis for arguments about levels of defence funding. Such arguments would be far more persuasive than assertions based only on claims that a particular percentage of GDP is appropriate for Australian defence spending.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- With the 2013 election now out of the way, the new government should instruct Defence to revisit the issues of level of contingency, warning time, force expansion and preparedness. This re-examination needs to reflect objective assessments of economic and military growth in the Indo-Pacific region, and the changing dynamic of international relationships. Conclusions about the level of strategic risk that follow from different levels of force size and preparedness would provide a secure basis for arguments about levels of defence funding. This would be far more persuasive than mere assertions that a particular percentage of GDP is appropriate for Australia's defence.

## Endnotes

- 1 This article draws in part on the author's paper 'Force Expansion and Warning Time', *Security Challenges*, Vol.8, No 2 (Winter 2012), pp33-47.
- 2 The new government has undertaken to publish a new Defence White Paper within 18 months of coming into office, but in the interim the 2013 White Paper represents the agreed and collective view of the senior officials involved in its drafting. Further, defence policy in Australia is basically bipartisan, and it is widely understood that the new government is broadly happy with the 2013 paper's first six chapters. The main discussion of warning time and force expansion in the 2013 White Paper is to be found at paragraphs 3.39, 3.40, 3.46, and 5.1-5.19.
- 3 It is appropriate also to mention the 2013 White Paper's statement about the new Australian Cyber Security Centre, building on the 2009 paper's commitment to a Cyber Security Operations Centre.

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