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Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper: ASEAN and the South China Sea

By Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto

Synopsis

Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper may indicate a future strategic policy of reactionary assertiveness with significant consequences for Southeast Asia's security, especially in the South China Sea.

Commentary

DESCRIBED AS 'clear eyed and unsentimental' by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper (DWP) reaffirms Australia's strategic attention towards maritime Southeast Asia. While the 2009 and 2013 DWPs also had this focus, the 2016 DWP bluntly expresses Australia's concern in the South China Sea.

In the 190-page long document, Canberra pledges to increase capital investment in defence capabilities from the current AUD9.4 billion to AUD 23 billion in 2025-26, mostly in the maritime domain. The concern is less what Australia will do with this investment than the consequences it will potentially bring to Southeast Asia, and its ASEAN grouping, in light of Australia's reactionary assertiveness against China's maritime ambitions in the South China Sea.

Continuity...

Compared to the previous two DWPs, the 2016 DWP reflects continuity in three key ways. Firstly, it lists Australia's 'strategic defence interests' as follows: (1) the security of Australia's northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communications; (2) a secure nearer region, encompassing Southeast Asia and South Pacific; and (3) a stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.

This seemingly geographically-arranged order is similar to the 'strategic interests' guiding the previous two DWPs.

Secondly, the 2016 DWP reiterates the previous DWPs' primacy of maritime strategy focusing on the sea-air gap along Australia's north. Maritime capabilities will be central in this enterprise, especially submarines that can provide 'a strategic advantage in terms of surveillance and protection of our maritime approaches'.

Thirdly, the 2016 DWP echoes the previous two DWPs in highlighting 'maritime Southeast Asia' that 'will always have particular significance to our security' where 'any military conventional threat to Australia' is likely to come through.

...and change

What differentiates the 2016 DWP from the previous two DWPs is its selective emphasis. Firstly, while all strategic defence interests are critical, the 2016 DWP puts a greater emphasis on the second. 'Australia's reliance on maritime trade with and through South East Asia', it says, 'means the security of our maritime approaches and trade routes within South East Asia must be protected, as must freedom of navigation, which provides for the free flow of maritime trade in international waters'.

Nowhere is this 'freedom of navigation' being challenged so close to Australia than in the South China Sea. This is the second aspect that sets the 2016 DWP apart from the other DWPs. Although the 2013 DWP has called the South China Sea disputes to Australia's strategic attention, the blunt emphasis of the 2016 DWP is unparalleled: 'Australia does not take sides on competing territorial claims in the South China Sea but we are concerned that land reclamation and construction activity by claimants raises tensions in the region', particularly 'the unprecedented pace and scale of China's land reclamation activities'.

Indeed, such a robust statement encapsulates the third unique aspect implicit in the 2016 DWP: Australia's reactionary assertiveness that may involve the conduct of military 'freedom of navigation operations' (FONOPs) against China's excessive maritime claims in the South China Sea, and anticipatory measures against China's larger military modernisation drives.

This can partly, if not entirely, justify what Turnbull describes as 'an historic modernisation' of Australia's naval capabilities, including the acquisitions of twelve regionally superior submarines, three additional air warfare destroyers, and nine new anti-submarine warfare frigates.

Regional consequences

Regardless of whether the plans therein are achievable, the 2016 DWP may indicate a bellwether of Australia's future strategic policy as attested to by the continuities present from the previous two DWPs. That the 2016 DWP elicited, predictably, a strong criticism from Beijing is not necessarily bad news. A stronger Australia can admittedly give Southeast Asia greater leverage vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea disputes.

Australia's strategic interests in Southeast Asia can also create more opportunities for defence cooperation. Indeed, regional countries can selectively tap on Australia's unique access to United States' defence technology and intelligence while their own military modernisations are underway.

Australia's regional bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation, such as the Five Power Defence Arrangement, may undertake more sophisticated exercise scenarios that will benefit its Southeast Asian partners. Arguably, Australia's 'middle power' status makes it a less sensitive defence partner for Southeast Asia than the major powers, such as the US.

Reactionary assertiveness

These opportunities notwithstanding, Southeast Asia should also be aware of the associated risks that may come with Australia's reactionary assertiveness. Given ASEAN's sensitivity towards the divisive prospect of major power influence in the region, it begs the question whether Australia's strategic policies are chiefly based on its own *raison d'être*, or largely a mere reflection of the US as its principal ally.

While the strategic interests of some ASEAN countries may align more closely with Australia's, ASEAN as a whole should remain cautious of being drawn deeper into Sino-American strategic competition that can potentially undermine its unity.

At the operational level, Australia's reactionary assertiveness can potentially affect Southeast Asian maritime security. Sandwiched between Australia and China, Southeast Asia would most likely be the first region affected by any miscalculation or accident involving Chinese and Australian maritime forces in the South China Sea. In spite of their best efforts, controlled or orchestrated escalation during the conduct of FONOPs is not foolproof.

Australia's assertiveness would not tantamount to greater instability in Southeast Asia, though this does not mean ASEAN can sit idly by either. ASEAN should discuss with Australia where the maximum tolerable limits of this reactionary assertiveness are so that it will actually remain part of the solution rather than the problem, including the possible scenario of China physically frustrating or challenging Australia's FONOPs.

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