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The Great Australian Defence Debate: Is China a Threat?

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In advance of a Defence White Paper expected in the next few weeks, a major debate has been going on in Australia about the security implications of the rise of China.

THE LOWY Institute for International Policy, a leading strategic think-tank in Australia, released a report recently that says Australia should dramatically increase its defence spending to meet the strategic challenges presented by the rise of China. While the report does not see China as a direct threat to Australia, it views the rise of China as creating uncertainty and a higher risk of regional conflict.

The report advocates a progressive increase in defence spending from the current level of about 2.0 per cent of gross domestic product to 2.5 per cent. This would allow Australia's submarine fleet to be enlarged and the current order of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to be increased, as well as an expansion of the Australian Army; in short, a big boost for each of the Australian services.

Hugh White, the author of the Lowy Institute report, is a former Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence and now head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. Earlier this year, he argued in an article in the international strategic journal *Survival* (vol. 50, No. 6, December 2008 – January 2009. pp. 85 – 104) the reasons why war in Asia “remains thinkable”. These reasons are similar to those in his Lowy report: building a new order in Asia will be extremely challenging; it will require significant concessions from the region's major powers; but these concessions may not be forthcoming.

White's arguments were rebutted in a piece in the same journal by Richard Bitzinger and Barry Desker from Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) on “Why East Asian War is Unlikely”. These authors saw an emerging “Beijing Consensus” built on an Asian model of development. They identified the significance of Asian values in shaping the region's response to global and regional developments. This was in contrast to the approach of White who used European models from history to support his pessimistic view of Asia's strategic future.

The Current Defence Debate

Hugh White has emerged as a “hawk” in the current great Australian defence debate. His paper comes soon after media reports of a stand-off in Canberra between the Department of Defence and the country’s two main intelligence agencies: the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO). This became so intense that the nation’s intelligence watchdog was called in to investigate whether the Defence Department was putting undue pressure upon the intelligence agencies to produce assessments that would support increased defence spending.

The debate has been about how to interpret and respond to China’s military expansion. Apparently the DIO and ONA assessments were relatively benign about any threat from China. This reflects a more pragmatic view of the implications for regional security of the rise of China as evident in the Bitzinger and Desker article.

The Defence Department wanted a much tougher assessment. A cynical observation would be that it wanted a credible threat to justify current plans for a major expansion of Australia’s defence capabilities. If that’s the case, then it would be “putting the cart before the horse”. Strategic assessments should drive defence budgets rather than vice versa.

The Defence Department’s position is strongly supported by Hugh White and other “hawks” in strategic think-tanks in Australia. Some of these are closely associated with defence industry, which would not want any cut-backs, or even delays, in current defence programmes. This is all in the lead up to a new Defence White Paper expected prior to the annual national Budget on 12 May.

Insular Insecurity

The view of the “hawks” suggests Australia still seeks security *against* rather than *with* the region. It also might show some lack of confidence about Australia’s role in the region, and a failure to appreciate Australia’s own geostrategic environment. Rather than seeing the oceans and seas surrounding Australia as a link to its regional neighbours, much Australian strategic thinking still views them primarily as a moat or barrier to unwanted intrusions from the region.

This feeling of insular insecurity has been evident again in much of the reaction to the recent increase in the numbers of illegal immigrants trying to reach Australia by sea. It is also evident in the arguments of the “hawks” for high tech defence capabilities to protect Australia and its interests in major conventional war. Unstated assessments of a possible threat from Australia’s large neighbour, Indonesia, may be another factor still evident in parts of the Australian defence community.

Sending the Wrong Messages

Many Australian defence statements, such as those from the “hawks”, may have an unintended consequence of promoting insecurity in the region. There are from time to time robust statements from Australian interest groups arguing the need for strike aircraft to reach particular Asian capitals, or for long-range submarines that can reach through Indonesia into the East Asian seas. There has also been talk of Australia becoming a “muscular regional power”, although the reasons for Australia developing that way were rather less than clear.

These hawkish statements do not go unnoticed in the region. They send mixed signals about Australia’s commitment to regional security. And they can also serve to promote a regional arms race that’s clearly not in Australia’s national interest. Earlier statements about Australia increasing its submarine force may well have led to Indonesia also seeking more submarines.

Budgetary Problems

Even if the “hawks” were to prevail in this great defence debate, it’s unlikely that the Australian Government could sustain the necessary real growth in defence spending. The Australian economy is moving into recession, and low growth rates are predicted for the next few years.

The Rudd government made an election commitment to maintain real growth in defence spending of 3.0 per cent per annum for the next 15 years. This would mean a much higher share of the national “cake” going to Defence. However, it’s now unlikely with all the other pressures on government, including the economic stimulus, health, education and welfare programmes already announced.

The recession provides a good excuse for government to walk back from many current commitments - something will have to give. And in the final analysis, there are fewer votes in Defence than in other Federal Government programmes.

Seeking Regional Views?

Senior officers from ONA visited Singapore in recent weeks as part of a quick trip around Southeast Asia. This may have been a coincidence, but the trip might also have been a last attempt to explore regional strategic thinking before the Defence White paper. Let’s hope for the sake of both Australia and the region, the views they took away were more in line with those of the region itself rather than with those of the hawks back in Australia.

In resolving the current defence debate, Australia might do more to heed views from the region on the region’s own strategic future. It might also take more notice of the regional reaction to hawkish statements from “down under”.

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