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AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN DEFENSE POLICY FROM 1901 TO PRESENT

By Major Jeremy “JB” Brown¹

AUSTRALIAN DEFENSE POLICY INTRODUCTION

Australia’s eras of defense and contemporary policy can be summed up in Clausewitzian fashion that the nature of Australia’s defense policy has remained the same over time while the characters (prime ministers and defense ministers) are the only thing that has changed. Since federation, Australian officials have been at odds as to the type of defense force Australia should maintain; whether it be developed for homeland defense or developed with the ability to conduct expeditionary operations. Historian David Horner shed some light on this by saying ‘there had been tension between the Australianists, who wanted a militia that could not be deployed outside Australia, and the Imperialists, who preferred a field force that could be deployed on imperial operations overseas.’ (Horner 2001) Out of this early defense identity crisis come a couple of enduring themes which are the subject of this analysis.

The first theme is Australia having ‘a small population and little direct power, so it needed to attach itself to great and powerful friends’ (Dalrymple 2003) while still attempting to singlehandedly secure its own borders from outside incursion. David Kilcullen expounds on the idea of Australia aligning its security with a world power by detailing 2 criteria. “These are that (1) the partner reflects Australia’s Western democratic values, and (2) the partner demonstrates an ability to create

Abstract:

Scholars generally consider there to be three main eras in Australian Defense Policy: The Imperial Defense era (1901-1945), Forward Defense era (1950-1975) and Defense of Australia era (1975-1997). These eras are informed by world events, leaders and outside powers that influence defense policy on the continent. This analytical analysis examines each major conceptual approach and themes defining defense policy throughout Australia’s history. Additionally, it assesses how these themes inform and guide Australia’s contemporary policy. Finally, the analysis provides recommended insights on ways Australia can maintain relevance as a competent middle-power within the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Imperial Defense, Forward Defense, Defense of Australia,

¹ Major Jeremy “JB” Brown is a U.S. Army Fellow at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, USA. The views expressed in this article are the author’s alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

a secure, stable, economically dynamic global environment.’ (Kilcullen 2007) The second theme is that ‘...the middle power concept has provided the one and perhaps only consistent framework for the conduct of Australian diplomacy.’ (Ungerer 2007) This essay will attempt to show Australian contemporary defense policy is shaped by these enduring themes because of the complex relationship between the country’s history and aspirations to remain a central figure in the middle power spectrum of supporting a rules-based order within the Pacific region. By conducting an analysis of white papers, government administrations and independent essays that discuss each defense era, key points and individuals will be identified that demonstrate Australia’s contemporary defense policy retains these enduring themes. Additionally, an understanding of each defense era will be illustrated and how each era propagates ideas into contemporary defense policy.

CONCEPT OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE ERA (’01-’45)

As stated previously, debates between the Australianists and Imperialists were ongoing and in an attempt at appeasement, ‘the government has maintained discretionary powers to deploy military forces overseas’ as demonstrated by ‘Australian troops...having traveled abroad to defend the strategic position of the Empire and the West.’ (Jordan et al. 2010, Griffiths et al. 2010) This is indicative of contemporary defense in which Australia’s deployments in support of American operations in the Middle East are seen as supporting Australia’s strategic global position. As a young nation, Australia continued to tie itself to the security and collective defense of the British Empire. To that end, ‘Australia subscribed to Britain’s grand strategic imperatives: maintaining the Empire, the supremacy of the Royal Navy and the balance of power in Europe.’ (Griffiths et al. 2010) Australia’s responsibilities to Britain were called upon during World War I when the ‘Royal Australian Navy was placed under British Admiralty command and a volunteer expeditionary force deployed overseas in support of British-led operations.’ (Beaumont 2001) In return for participating in the cooperative defense of the Empire, Australia received ‘British political and economic might, and relationships with other Dominions to secure our portion of the globe and our trade, finances and lines of communication.’ (Kilcullen 2007) This arrangement lasted until the early 1940s and the outbreak of World War II when both Britain and Australia would look to another powerful nation for assistance.

In the late 1930s, Opposition Leader John Curtin gave Parliament a warning that ‘the dependence of Australia upon the competence, let alone the readiness, of British statesmen to send forces to our aid is too dangerous a hazard upon which to found Australian defence policy.’ (Defence 2004) During World War II, both Australia and Britain sought a relationship with the United States that would bring about an acceptable outcome to the wars in both Europe and the Pacific. With the fall of Singapore, many colonies began to question whether or not Britain could protect the empire. Britain’s focus on the war in Europe caused concern in Australia and led to a burgeoning relationship with the United States. The enormous toll the war took on Britain and the uncertainty that they would be able to provide support to Australia if Japan ever attacked again led to a review of Australia’s defense relationship with Britain. Curtin’s words rang true at the conclusion of the war and left Australia unsure of who their great and powerful friend would be until the signing of the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) Treaty in 1951.

Australia emerged from World War II with H.V. Evatt as the Minister for External Affairs who was the first to exploit the middle power concept when describing Australia on the world stage at the 1945 United Nations (UN) Conference on International Organization in San Francisco. He defined a middle power as ‘those states which by reason of their resources and geographic position will prove to be of key importance for the maintenance of security in different parts of the world.’ (Ungerer 2007) Using this middle power concept to describe Australia, Evatt fought to get it a bigger seat at the post-war negotiation table. By arguing that Australia played as big of a role as other allied powers in defeating enemy forces and that negotiation outcomes should be based on regional spheres of importance ‘Evatt expected that Australia would be afforded a special position in the UN security structures commensurate with its perceived regional responsibilities.’ (Ungerer 2007) Evatt’s aggressiveness and promotion of Australia’s interests paid off when he was invited to attend sub-committee hearings and receive a bigger say in post-war discussions. Evatt sold Australia as a middle power resulting in the country receiving greater diplomatic recognition amongst other middle and great powers.

CONCEPT OF FORWARD DEFENCE ERA (‘50-’75)

As a geographically isolated nation, Australia’s relationship with the United States during World War II was indicative of the need to build strong alliances to ensure security. The signing of the ANZUS treaty was a major milestone in solidifying this relationship, and the participation of both nations in the Korean War reinforced the security bond. Robert Menzies’ government, in a lasting effort to forward Australia’s interests, continued ‘securing Australia by contributing through the alliance partnership to a secure global system.’ (Kilcullen 2007) In addition, Menzies ‘argued that in order to meet this existential threat (communism), Australia would not only need to rely on its “great and powerful friends”, but that the central themes of Australian foreign policy should be support and loyalty to the great protectors.’ (Ungerer 2007) Australia showed this loyalty by taking the threat of the spread of communism as seriously as the United States, particularly due to the fact that if it was strategically important to United States interests in the Pacific then it was important to Australian security. This notion was successful for both Canberra and Washington through the end of the Korean War as it confirmed Australia’s safety in the region however, the war in Vietnam would stress this bond.

Garfield Barwick, Minister for External Affairs in 1964, gave a statement to parliament that reaffirmed Evatt’s middle power argument and continued the notion of fighting to prevent the spread of communism.

‘Australia is a middle power in more senses than one. [...] But also it has common interests with both the advanced and the underdeveloped countries; it stands in point of realized wealth between the haves and the have-nots. It has a European background and is set in intimate geographical propinquity to Asia. This ambivalence brings some strength and offers promise of a future of which Australia can be confident, a future of increasing influence.’ (Ungerer 2007)

Three factors had an impact on Australia’s shifting middle power role in the Pacific region between 1968 and 1975. (1) Australian support to the American loss in Vietnam had the potential to seriously

damage their reputation as an influential middle power. (2) Britain's withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore left a security vacuum in the Pacific region. (3) America's Nixon Doctrine 'stated that allied states were expected to do more for their own security but could rely on help from the United States....' (Brown 1991) Australia, undeterred, solidified its security situation by becoming a member of the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA). Australia's defense arrangement with the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore would necessitate a need to reform to defense policy in order to be a proactive member of the arrangement.

The result was a shift to self-reliance with elements of both powerful friends and middle power status as evidenced when Defense Minister David Fairbairn acknowledged that 'we need defence equipment and manning giving Australian services an increasing measure of self-reliance and ability to act alone in certain situations. On the other hand, an intensification of our defence understandings with the United States will...provide the foundation of Australian security....' (Fairbairn 1972) Australia was attempting to be both self-reliant and influential to security within the region in support of the FPDA while also maintaining an unclear alliance with the United States following Vietnam.

CONCEPT OF DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA ERA ('75-'97)

In 1976, the Fraser government-produced Australia's initial defense white paper. During this era, Australia produced defense white papers in 1976, 1987 and 1994. There was an ongoing, but never fully achieved, concept that permeated each paper. This is the concept of self-reliance which was originally presented in the 1972 Australia Defense Review as a result of Britain's full withdrawal and reaction to the United States Nixon Doctrine. Australia was attempting to create its own identity as an independent state capable of conducting its own national defense. Due to varying levels of defense force readiness, attempts to buy the best equipment from around the world at a fair price, a distinct lack of political strategy, and unknown regional and global instability Australia never fully achieved the idea of self-reliance. Australia continued to fill its niche role as a regional middle power. Additionally, attempts at self-reliance did not diminish Australia's dependence on the United States in the event of a major threat however, the major threat was conspicuously absent from identification and the 1976 white paper upheld 'the requirements and scope for Australia's defence activity are limited essentially to the areas closer to home.' (Defence WP 1976)

The 1987 white paper took self-reliance a step further and transformed the idea into an isolationist notion of defense. The Hawke Government's review of defense capabilities was conducted by Paul Dibb in 1986 and presented a 'strategy of denial.' 'The intention of the strategy was to deter potential adversaries from bridging Australia's air and sea approaches by developing capabilities that would create sufficient problems for any invading force....' (Dibb 1986) Australia was walking a tightrope in that it wanted to outwardly improve regional policies defining its middle power position but with a focus on internal defense. Additionally, 'concerns were expressed that the Dibb Review was, in effect, recommending a withdrawal from the whole-hearted level of participation in the ANZUS alliance that Australia commonly pursued.' (Sinclair 1986) The tension with the 1987 white paper, much like the 1976 paper, potentially saw Australia willing to give up hard-earned political and defense gains since World War II by embracing a

defense strategy that didn't encompass a defined threat. The government was willing to embrace an inward defense concept that would possibly alienate allies and regional partners even after the same document encouraged the view 'that Australia faced no presently identifiable military threat, except for the remote possibility of global war.' (Defence WP 1987) Finally, the 1987 white paper made a point to reiterate the importance of Australia's strategic alliance with the United States, especially as it related to potential Soviet influence in the south Pacific region. Australia was in an awkward growing period in which it wanted freedom from relying on a powerful friend but was unwilling to reflect this freedom by changing or growing force structure in order to gain self-reliant independence.

The conclusion of the cold war didn't change Australia's outlook on defense policy. The 1994 white paper maintained self-reliance but also put increased importance on regional engagements while maintaining an alliance with the United States. The white paper's focus was derived from the 1993 Strategic Review which 'reinforced the defence of Australia doctrine but also placed a higher degree of importance on supporting broader regional engagement and Australia's strategic alliances.' (Defence 1993) As in 1976 and 1987, the 1994 white paper sought self-reliance without the capability to do so by attempting to emphasize strengthening long-term defense capacity through investment, rather than sustaining sufficient preparedness. Without a threat to survival, it was perceived as acceptable to allow defense readiness to decline. However, the defense force still attempted to maintain readiness to deal with short-warning conflicts. Again, Australia was attempting to play a middle power role in the maintenance of regional security without the defense readiness level to be able to conduct operations effectively.

CONCLUSION

Different eras focused on shifting themes in Australia's defense policy however, Australia as a middle power and reliance on a powerful friend have endured since 1901. The only difference is the amount of emphasis on each theme. Federation through World War II saw a great reliance on Britain as the great and powerful friend with no stress on the middle power concept. The conclusion of World War II ushered in prominence on the middle power concept where Evatt fought to get Australia their just deserts at the post-war negotiation table. Through the end of the Korean War, Australia was searching for a powerful friend and found many multi-lateral organizations to assist with security. The ANZUS treaty, the UN and the FPDA were just a few organizations that Australia relied on to provide defense assistance. At the conclusion of the cold war, Australia again took on the role of middle power by attempting to strengthen ties with regional neighbors. Interestingly, Australia also took a distinctly isolationist approach to defense while increasingly embracing a strategic defense partnership with the United States.

Australia's contemporary defense policy still embraces the middle power concept and a strong alliance with the United States. Australia is committed to being a capable middle power that can advise and have a strong say in defining regional policy by acting 'as an economic and security link between developed and developing countries.... Although imprecise, inconsistent and sometimes malleable in the hands of various political leaders since 1945, the middle power concept has provided the one and perhaps only consistent framework for the conduct of Australian diplomacy.' (Ungerer 2007) Australia's alliance with the United States has reinforced over time as demonstrated by the stationing of American Marines in

Darwin and supporting American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan which were seen as defending Australia's global interests. Australia continues to stand by Robert Menzies statement of support and loyalty to powerful friends because 'the United States still meets our two fundamental partnership criteria of shared values and capability.' (Kilcullen 2007)

As stated at the start of this analysis, the nature of Australia's defense policy has remained the same over time while the characters (prime ministers and defense ministers) are the only thing that has changed. In the conclusion of a historical analysis of Australia's white papers, the authors allude to the fact that the more things change regionally and globally, the more they remain the same by re-counting:

'Australia's significantly changing strategic environment has been reflected in each of the defence white papers produced since 1976—from the end of the Vietnam War and the Cold War to the escalation of international terrorism, the proliferation of WMDs, the rise of China, cyber-attacks, conflict in the Middle East and fluctuating tensions in the Asia-Pacific. Additionally, each white paper asserted Australia's need to be self-reliant while correspondingly emphasizing the importance of the United States alliance. However, the degree to which these factors translated into changes in ADF capability has been marginal.' (Brangwin et al 2015)

Australian officials continue to remain at odds over how best to utilize the defense force and to what extent military diplomacy improves Australian strategic political agenda. The 2016 white paper continues to confirm the country's consistent theme of self-reliance in the middle power spectrum with undertones of American alliance in global security operations and maintenance of a rules-based order within the Indo-Pacific. What remains inconsistent is the ever-changing geopolitical environment in which Australia finds itself and how quickly Australia may be looked to by neighbors and regional partners to provide leadership during low-intensity conflict or disaster relief operations. With that in mind, Australian policy officials must ensure defense policy is agile enough to quickly adapt to regional concerns while maintaining the forethought of what capabilities are required to combat future threats or disasters in the region through both hard and soft power. Only by maintaining flexibility, focusing on future force requirements in the face of conflict, and improving regional partnerships and alliances such as the US, Japan and Australia Trilateral Alliance will Australia be able to answer the call as a capable middle power in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific.

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