

STRATEGY

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Deterrence through denial

A strategy for an era of reduced warning time

Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith

May 2021

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CONTENTS

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES	4
WARNING TIME AND DEFENCE PLANNING IN THE PAST	5
THE NEW WARNING TIME DEFINED	7
CONTINGENCIES FOR AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE PLANNING	9
OPERATIONS IN THE DIRECT DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA AND ITS INTERESTS	11
WARNING TIME AND DETERRENCE	12
CYBER OPERATIONS	13
TAIWAN	14
KOREA	15
REGIONAL OPERATIONS—SOUTHEAST ASIA	16
REGIONAL OPERATIONS—THE SOUTH PACIFIC	18
OTHER CONTINGENCIES	19
THE CHINA CONTINGENCY	20
THE POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES	21
BEYOND THE MEDIUM TERM	23
NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS	25
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	26
NOTES	29
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	31

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Australia's new strategic policy states that Australia can no longer assume a 10-year strategic warning time for a major conventional attack as an appropriate basis for defence planning. We must now be alert to a full range of current and future threats. They include the possibility of high-intensity conflict in which Australia's sovereignty and security may be directly tested.

The importance of greatly shortened warning time can't be overstated because it has serious implications for a much more capable defence force at higher states of preparedness. Because potential warning times are now much shorter, the new framework for strategic risk management by Defence and the wider government will have to be very different from that of the past.

Contingencies with little or no warning carry severe implications for the accuracy of warning indicators and the ability to make timely intelligence assessments. We now need a more comprehensive suite of political, strategic and tactical warning indicators that embrace the implications of different levels of conflict, extending from coercion and 'grey zone' unconventional attacks with little or no warning through to sustained high-intensity military conflict for which there should be some warning indicators.

Australia now needs to implement serious changes to how warning time is considered in defence planning. The need to plan for reduced warning time has implications for the Australian intelligence community, defence strategic policy, force structure priorities, readiness and sustainability. Important changes will also be needed with respect to personnel, stockpiles of missiles and munitions, and fuel supplies. We can no longer assume that Australia will have time gradually to adjust military capability and preparedness in response to emerging threats. In other words, there must be a new approach in Defence to managing warning, capability and preparedness, and detailed planning for rapid expansion and sustainment.

This paper addresses those issues, recognising that they're a revolutionary break with the past era of what were much more comfortable assumptions about threats to Australia. Considering the complexity of the issues involved, we have identified further areas for research, including at the classified level.

As the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (2020 DSU) observes, these trends signal a security environment markedly different from the relatively more benign past—with greater potential for miscalculation, including state-on-state conflict that could engage the ADF.¹ That doesn't mean that there would be no warning of the possibility of armed conflict; rather, that warning will potentially be much shorter and possibly ambiguous.

WARNING TIME AND DEFENCE PLANNING IN THE PAST

For most of the past half-century, warning times of 10 years or more for a major attack on our territory were integral to defence planning. That conceptual framework gave rise to the concept of the ‘core force and expansion base’, in which force expansion would occur in response to intelligence assessments that Australia’s strategic circumstances were deteriorating. Classified official strategic guidance for many decades relied on a timely warning ahead of serious threats occurring.

For example, the *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy 1983*, which was classified Cabinet-in-Confidence Secret Austeo, noted that Australia’s defence posture relied on warning time and on the government acting on warning time to expand the ADF. It observed that this posture called for careful judgement of priorities, ‘and is not without risks’. The concept of warning time wasn’t of a force in being that was static until a threat had materialised, but one responsive to any strategic change with the potential for weakening Australia’s security. In other words, prudent reliance on warning time would provide for timely expansion of the ADF against the uncertainties of the future. Even so, the concept of ‘no threat for 10 years’ was in some quarters fundamentally distrusted.

It was for this reason that the 1987 Defence White Paper, *The Defence of Australia*, set out for the first time in the public domain a comprehensive explanation about how warning time was derived and its implications for defence preparation. It observed that the concept of warning, and its application to Australian defence planning, had been given careful attention by successive governments. The concept had its origins in the *Strategic Basis* documents of the early 1970s, which noted that it would take many years for any regional country to develop the substantial military capabilities required to sustain major operations against Australia. Within our region, no nation had ‘the ships, aircraft and transportable forces that would be necessary to launch and sustain an effective assault upon Australia.’² The White Paper observed that:

these are among the most expensive and sophisticated forms of defence technology for any country to acquire. Their acquisition and introduction into full operational service could not be concealed and the development of the operational expertise to use this technology effectively in an assault on Australia would take many years.³

That central defence strategic planning tool of warning time basically continued over the following decades to the present. The 2016 Defence White Paper went so far as to imply that no major attack on our territory was likely over the next 20 years.⁴ Scarcely four years after that relaxed judgement, our strategic circumstances have deteriorated so much that they have caused a radical change to Australia’s defence planning.

Above all else, in the past our geographical position has provided assurance that we would have considerable intelligence warning of the possibility of substantial threat. There are still significant elements of our geography that favour us—not least, our distance from the major centres of power in North Asia. Even so, China’s militarisation of the South China Sea now increasingly threatens our strategic space. Moreover, prudent contemporary defence planning needs to consider the clear possibility of Chinese bases with military potential being established in the archipelago and islands to our north and east.

Australian defence planning has long considered that, were a potentially hostile power to gain access to military bases in the South Pacific or nearby Southeast Asia, that would have direct and important implications for our security interests. It would open a wider range of possible threats involving our centres of population and industry. Even then, any adversary would need to protect long and vulnerable lines of communication back through the Pacific. In the past, we would have judged that powerful US maritime forces would deter China from such a hazardous adventure: in the coming years, that may no longer be the case.

THE NEW WARNING TIME DEFINED

The classical definition of warning has three phases: political, strategic and tactical. *Political warning* comes from the increase in state-to-state tension that raises the possibility that military force may be used. That can occur rapidly in an unforeseen crisis or can accumulate across a period of days or months. *Strategic warning* comes from indications that the enemy is building military forces consistent with a plan to use them. *Tactical warning* is the detection of the initial movements of the attack itself before combat is joined. If we fail to obtain warning, a surprise attack occurs that catches us militarily unprepared—with all the consequences that implies. This classical three-phase approach to warning is the one that was used in the Cold War.⁵

The Cold War was strategically a much more black-and-white era than the current one. Defence planners had to cope with warning time, measured in minutes, of the very real possibility of the launch of a nuclear attack. The threat of nuclear Armageddon was ever-present for decades from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War in 1991. Australia's hosting of Australian–American joint defence facilities carried the risk that Australia would have been a target for nuclear attack in the event of superpower conflict.⁶ Nevertheless, Australia wasn't a frontline state in the Cold War. Instead, most of our defence effort was focused on our own region.

Australia now faces a very different situation with respect to warning. The risk of global nuclear war is much reduced and with it the need for sustained very high levels of alert for the nuclear forces of the US and Russia. On the other hand, it's no longer appropriate to take the relaxed approach of 10 years warning for major conventional operations that has characterised Australian defence planning for much of the past 50 years. Government policy acknowledges that such a prolonged warning time is no longer an appropriate basis on which to structure and prepare the ADF.

Developments in modern technology demand that we include an additional new aspect of warning, which includes the possibility of little or no warning of cyberattacks capable of disabling key elements of our society, such as the internet, electricity generation, water supply, air transport and the financial sector. Those are examples of so-called grey-zone threats in which it might be difficult to declare whether we were under deliberate attack or not—and, if so, from which state or non-state entity. In 2013, the architect of Russia's hybrid warfare, chief of the general staff General Gerasimov, enunciated a new doctrine of Russian warfare. Gerasimov saw conventional war between armies as a thing of the past. Instead, he called for 'long-distance, countless actions against the enemy ... Informational actions, devices and means ... with the information space opening wide symmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy'.⁷ He talked about a perfectly thriving state sinking into a 'web of chaos' under such an attack. One could now add to Gerasimov's definition the future use of drones and artificial intelligence, in which it might be difficult to define who 'the enemy' is.

So, we must now factor in a new definition of defence warning that has to embrace not only the traditional use of force but grey-zone activities in which the precise moment of attack might be difficult to detect. This calls for a radically new approach to warning and the sorts of intelligence indicators that may—or may not—confirm that we're under an enemy attack. That will lead us later in this paper to some policy-related recommendations about the analysis of warning indicators.

But first, we need to address the issue of intelligence assessment and knowing one's enemies. The quality of an intelligence estimate depends not only on its accuracy about foreign intentions but also on its timeliness and relevance to policymakers' concerns.

Andrew Marshall, the former long-serving Director of Net Assessments in the Pentagon, specified four categories of net assessment:

- foreseeing potential conflicts
- comparing strengths and predicting outcomes in given contingencies
- monitoring current developments and being alerted to developing problems
- warning of imminent military danger.

That approach obviously goes beyond the traditional collection and analysis of data that make for 'intelligence appraisals'. In Australia's current strategic circumstances, making net assessments and rigorously challenging credible contingencies—ranging from grey-zone actions through to high-intensity conflict—should now be made an obligatory part of the policy advising process in the Australian Defence organisation. It will require a deep understanding not only of Australia's potential adversaries but also of the strengths and weaknesses of our own war-fighting capabilities.

The sources of the government's information about other powers and the processes by which assessments are brought to bear on the government's decisions now need to be revisited. Attempts by one government to see things from the standpoint of another government have historically been prone to failure.⁸ Moreover, the shared tendency of analysts and defence planners to overestimate the potential enemy's capacity and especially its freedom of choice needs to be challenged. By that, we don't mean that more data, more analysts or more investment in intelligence collection will always yield shrewder net assessments. The capacities of modern governments to gather and analyse intelligence are becoming ever much greater, but the task of appraising potential enemies in forming net assessments is growing ever more complex and more difficult as the range of threats is becoming more elusive. We need more net assessments in which actual decision-makers play a key role, as well as intelligence officers with policy experience.

Next, we come to the issue of warning in the context of surprise attack. Richard Betts argues that governments should expect to be surprised. He believes that their ability to interpret other people's politics is always limited. But he also acknowledges that inadequacies in warning are rarely due to the absence of anyone in the system ringing an alarm. He suggests that the principal cause of surprise isn't the failure of intelligence but the unwillingness of political leaders to believe intelligence or to react to it with sufficient dispatch. Betts argues that politicians' reluctance to authorise a military response to an early warning is rarely due to stupidity or negligence. Rather, he argues, it's due to concern, sometimes justifiable, that military action may worsen the crisis and decrease the chances of avoiding war.⁹

All this leads us to the view that we need to lessen the prospects of surprise by rigorously addressing those contingencies that are credible in the short to medium term. Later in this paper there's a brief discussion of possible more serious contingencies beyond the medium term.

CONTINGENCIES FOR AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE PLANNING

Changes in Australia's strategic circumstances over recent years have two major consequences. First, there's now a country in our broader region that has the capacity to impose high levels of military risk to Australia and our interests. That is, of course, a reference to China. China's economic and military strengths have grown spectacularly over the past two decades, and there are few signs that this expansion won't continue. It gives China the ability to exert economic and military pressure on others, potentially at short notice, when and where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believes it's in its interests to do so.

Second, there's growing evidence that China is in practice following such policies of economic and military coercion. There are many current examples. They include the *de facto* annexation and militarisation of the South China Sea, competition with Indonesia over the waters off Indonesia's Natuna Islands, continued military pressure on Taiwan, provocation against Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, violent confrontation with India in the Himalayas, economic sanctions against Australia, intelligence collection on a massive scale, including through cyber espionage, and continued investment in China's Belt and Road Initiative, with its potential to give China military as well as commercial advantage.¹⁰

This situation changes radically the conceptual framework for assumptions relating to warning time. That is, the potential length of warning for the defence contingencies that should form the basis for planning for the structure and preparedness of the ADF is now much shorter than for most of the past 50 years. That doesn't mean that there would be no warning, as nations don't lightly decide to embark on campaigns requiring the use of military force, and, in many circumstances, there would be a need to prepare for such activities. The key point, however, is that motive and intent can change relatively quickly, thus complicating the already difficult task of intelligence collection, analysis and risk assessment. And, in many respects, we can't afford to assume that the unexpected won't happen. We're now in a period of continuing contestation and potentially quick escalation.

To analyse the implications of warning time, as Richard Betts observes, defence planners need to address three interrelated questions: Readiness for when? Readiness for what? Readiness of what?¹¹ As all those who have ever been involved in defence planning know, a major interaction between answers to those questions comes from their implications for resources: competition between decisions on resource allocation is inevitable, and the resolution of that competition is integral to defence planning.

A central question, therefore, is what contingencies should be included in the basis for Defence planning, in what timescale might they become credible, and what forces would Australia need to protect and promote Australia's interests. The range of potential threats that Australia now faces, each with its own specific needs for readiness and sustainability, is wide. We don't discuss all possible contingencies in this paper: there's no discussion of military aid to civil power or authority, humanitarian relief or UN operations, for example. Rather, we take a sufficient sample from which to draw robust conclusions about the force structure and its preparedness within the much-reduced warning parameters of today's strategic circumstances.

It's important for analysis to recognise the extent to which Australia's involvement in contingencies would be discretionary. Further, each contingency would have its own prospect of a good or a bad outcome (that is, they have different levels of risk) and consequences. As with the analysis of Australia's strategic circumstances in previous decades, contingencies that posed a risk to Australia's interests in a direct way would require a clear response. That is, there would be no discretion about whether Australia would be involved, although there would be options for the nature of that response, depending on the specific contingency. Other, less directly consequential, contingencies would offer a wider range of response options and prudent risk-management alternatives.

OPERATIONS IN THE DIRECT DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA AND ITS INTERESTS

It isn't conceivable that an Australian Government wouldn't respond to direct attacks on Australia and our direct interests. Such threats could range from grey-zone activities such as cyberattack (discussed below) up to a major assault on the Australian mainland.

The nature of our strategic geography means that many of the forms of pressure that could be brought against us would be in the maritime domain. They could include harassment of shipping in international waters, and circumstances in which Australia-bound shipping wasn't the only target of hostile attention. It follows, then, that Australia's principal response options would also be maritime. That observation is consistent with the focus over many decades on the development of the maritime capabilities of the RAN and RAAF, including the surveillance capability of the Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN) and the development of bases in the west and north.

In the development of capabilities to defend Australia itself, capable air defence aircraft, airborne early warning and control aircraft, refuelling aircraft, surveillance systems (including JORN), northern basing and much-improved command arrangements, including at the strategic level, will continue to need priority. Australia has also at least the elements of a deterrence capability in the form of the current and planned submarine force and strike and electronic warfare aircraft, the range of which can be extended through in-flight refuelling.

The question is whether the readiness and sustainability of these highly potent capabilities is consistent with the reduced timescales in which Australia might now need to be able to respond. There's insufficient publicly available information to be able to answer that, but it's important to note that the challenges could be formidable. They include round-the-clock operations sustained over months rather than days, fuel supplies (especially to northern bases), sufficient numbers of aircrew, and sufficient supplies of munitions and maintenance spares. At least anecdotally, there's little provision in the shorter term for increases in stocks of sustainment spares.¹²

The key point is that there needs to be an explicit assessment of how (or whether) the current approach to readiness and sustainability would constrain the options available to the government to respond to challenges to our direct interests: that is, an assessment of risk. Such an assessment would necessarily involve assumptions about the reliability of timely resupply, especially from the US (and potentially at a time when US forces would also be operating at a higher tempo), the nature of the contingencies in question, and the availability of fallback options. Irrespective of the difficulties inherent in making those assessments, government ministers need to be left in no doubt about the consequences of their and the government's decisions on readiness and sustainability.

Beyond the medium term, there's also the question of whether the size of the response would be sufficient, and how Australia should plan to expand the ADF in a timely way to meet the demands of higher levels of threat. This is discussed in a later section.

WARNING TIME AND DETERRENCE

One way of lessening the risk of too much dependence on warning time and political responses would be to develop a posture of deterrence in which Australia possesses highly credible accurate, long-range missile strike capabilities. This would be a policy of deterrence through denial. The 2020 DSU advocates growing the ADF's self-reliance for delivering deterrent effects. It calls for the need to deter actions against Australia's interests. The nature of current and future threats requires Defence to develop a different set of capabilities that 'must be able to hold potential adversaries' forces and infrastructure at risk from a greater distance and therefore influence their calculus of costs involved in threatening Australian interests'.¹³ Longer range strike weapons, cyber capabilities and area-denial systems are specifically mentioned.

Acquiring that deterrent capability must now assume the highest priority in the government's defence planning because it will reduce our dependence on the accurate assessment of short warning time. Any credible future enemy operating directly against us will have highly vulnerable lines of logistics support back to its home base in North Asia. Therefore, having the capability to destroy an adversary's forces and infrastructure directly threatening us would greatly enhance our deterrence posture. Concentrating completely on warning is no longer acceptable. The probability that deterrence will work is reinforced if we have a more certain ability to deny an attacker the achievement of its military objectives. Solid deterrence provides a hedge against surprise, raises the costs to an adversary of acting against Australian interests and, if sufficient, makes an enemy's attack irrational.

However, having an ADF deterrent force capable of repelling attack from its normal posture in peacetime without mobilisation, reinforcement and movement would be very expensive. But having a deterrent force based on the concept of denial—as distinct from deterrence through the much more demanding concept of deterrence through punishment—should be more affordable. Deterrence through punishment involves attacking the adversary's territory, whereas deterrence through denial is limited to attacking the adversary's forces and associated infrastructure directly threatening us. In any case, the idea of Australia being able to inflict unacceptable punishment on a big power such as China would be ridiculous. The bottom line for defence policy is that, as confidence in deterrence by denial goes up, our dependence on early response to warnings should go down.

In other words, it would be easier and cheaper to go to a higher state of alert with this concept than with one based on deterrence through punishment. There would still be a need, of course, to respond to warning indicators and to take advantage of whatever degree of warning were available. If we didn't believe that there would be at least some warning, then large parts of the ADF would need to be kept at high states of alert indefinitely—a very expensive exercise and one that would be difficult to justify in normal circumstances.

In the final analysis, warning is a necessary but insufficient condition for avoiding surprise. While urgency must be given to improving the intelligence indicators for warning of an attack, we must also have decisive deterrence capabilities in place, as well as the capability to move quickly to a heightened level of preparedness and the use of the expansion base.

CYBER OPERATIONS

Cyber operations against us, both for espionage and potentially in the form of cyberattack, are clearly a form of contingency that would demand a response. Australia has already been the subject of aggressive attempts to gain economic, political and security intelligence through cyber exploitation by a variety of external actors, including China. In this sense, therefore, the warning time is zero. In response, Australian governments have strengthened the country's ability to withstand such attempts at exploitation. In addition, there have been cases of cyber-harassment, such as interruptions of functionality through distributed denial-of-service attacks. Whether Australia has been subject to more serious attempts at cyberattack isn't in the public domain. That such operations are possible isn't in dispute; the Stuxnet attack on Iran's nuclear program in 2010, allegedly by the US and Israel, was a prominent example.

A campaign of cyberattack and intensified cyber-exploitation against Australia could be launched with little notice, given the right level of motivation, and would have the advantage of having at least a level of plausible deniability while imposing limits to what might be envisaged as a proportional response. Such response options available to Australia would include retaliation, such as a government-sanctioned cyberattack—a capability that the Australian Government has acknowledged that it has. (This capability has already been used against terrorists, but whether it's been used more widely isn't publicly known.¹⁴) The warning time for the need to conduct such operations is potentially very short, meaning that there needs to be a high level of preparedness, including the ability quickly to expand the cyber workforce (with a concomitant need for expedited security clearances), and cyberattack campaigns that are thought out well in advance. There's a strong argument that such planning should include within its scope the possibility of causing high levels of damage to the adversary's infrastructure.

TAIWAN

The CCP has made very clear its commitment to bringing Taiwan under the control of Beijing and to bringing about the political unification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. While this isn't a new issue (having its origins in effect in the retreat of the Chinese Nationalist Government to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949), China has now intensified its campaign of coercion against Taiwan, for example through the provocative flight of military combat aircraft through Taiwanese airspace and through increased levels of hostile rhetoric. President Xi Jinping has made it clear that he doesn't exclude the use of force to gain control over Taiwan. Nevertheless, on the evidence so far, the US Government remains committed to Taiwan's security and its continued existence as a sovereign entity and economic partner.¹⁵ The CCP most likely recognises the strength of that commitment.¹⁶

There remains, however, the possibility of miscalculation, or mistaken judgement, or inadequate escalation control following a minor incident, or simply a gamble by the CCP that the sudden use of substantial force would be worth the risk. Any of those could lead to major armed confrontation between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and US forces. Whether, and to what extent, Australia would choose to be involved in such a contingency would depend on the specifics at the time. Nevertheless, it's more likely than not that the Australian Government would conclude that it had no option but to get involved in some way. A key factor in this respect would be that a failure by Australia to make a significant military contribution would inflict major and lasting damage on the defence and security relationship between Australia and the US.

In any case, Australia would necessarily be involved through the operation of the Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap. Beyond that, options would include one or more submarines, maritime patrol aircraft and other contributions to maritime operations and surveillance, electronic warfare aircraft, airborne early warning and patrol aircraft, and possibly fighter aircraft. In all important respects, such options would draw on capabilities that already command a priority for operations in the direct defence of Australia. For such contributions to make a difference and not to be merely symbolic, there would need to be extensive operational coordination between US and Australian forces and an acceptance by the Australian Government that the ADF would be likely to suffer casualties. The current high levels of exercising and collaboration in the maritime sphere provide a strong basis on which to build for such operations. It's more questionable whether elements of the Australian Army should be involved, as it's difficult to see how planning for such an involvement could avoid extensive liaison with Taiwan's armed forces—something that would be severely counterproductive in the handling of Australia's wider relationship with China.

Planning for such a contingency should assume a warning period of perhaps a few months. The key issues for preparedness would be the levels of training appropriate to high-intensity operations, sustainable numbers of aircrew for extended operations, and assured supplies of weapons and maintenance spares.

Were the warning period to be much shorter, it's likely that Australia's ability to respond in a timely way would be limited, leading to a much smaller contribution to the operations.

KOREA

Similar arguments apply to Australia's potential involvement in the defence of South Korea against attack by North Korea. There are, however, some important differences: Korea's distance from Australia would give our involvement there a lesser priority than in contingencies closer to home, and the consequences of making only a modest contribution would be less adverse for our relationship with the US than in the case of Taiwan. Australian Government policy already recognises the lower priority that would attach to operations in the North Pacific compared to those in areas closer to Australia.¹⁷ Such contributions that Australia might make (beyond the intelligence functions of Pine Gap) would involve maritime or air power, building on the ADF's already extensive collaboration with US forces in those areas.¹⁸

REGIONAL OPERATIONS— SOUTHEAST ASIA

The range of possible contingencies in Southeast Asia is wide. They include the continued harassment of ASEAN fishing fleets and offshore installations by the China Coast Guard and the PLA, the threatened use of the Coast Guard and PLA Navy to enforce international recognition of China's annexation of the South China Sea, and the threatened or actual use of military force against another's territory (as in the case of China's invasion of Vietnam in February 1979 'to teach Vietnam a lesson'), potentially leading to long-term occupation. This is on top of the use of economic inducements and coercion designed to encourage acquiescence to Chinese hegemony. The challenge for this paper is to gain a clearer picture of the extent to which Australia's interests would be engaged.

The 2020 DSU states that:

The capacity to conduct cooperative defence activities with countries in the region is fundamental to our ability to shape our strategic environment. For defence planning, shaping Australia's strategic environment includes preventing our operational access in the region from being constrained. Constrained access would limit cooperative activities and the ADF's ability to deploy military force in support of shared interests. We must also be prepared to lead coalition operations where it is in the interests of the region for us to do so, especially in our immediate region.¹⁹

This is an important statement of Australia's recognition that our own security is directly linked to the security of the region of which we're part.

It's difficult to see that Australia would willingly become involved in other nations' fishing disputes or, for that matter, the defence of their offshore installations in grey-zone operations. Australia's approach even to freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea is one of caution—reflecting *inter alia* the great disparity of military power between Australia and China. If, nevertheless, Australia were to decide to position itself to be able to make such contributions, it would need to accept that close-proximity freedom of navigation operations could risk the loss of one of our warships and significant casualties. Another option for Australia would be to offer to provide intelligence and surveillance information.

The threat of military force against another's territory would be a different matter. It isn't possible to know in advance how the Australian Government would respond. Nevertheless, it's clear that our interests would be much more closely caught up in the sovereignty of, say, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia than in that, for example, of Cambodia or Vietnam. Again, it's more likely that Australia would be more in a position to contribute air and maritime forces, and that the country being assisted would value those forces more highly than land forces. Any involvement by Australia would of course need the agreement of the country concerned. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, the provisions of the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Integrated Air Defence System would be relevant.

Such contingencies aren't a credible prospect in the shorter term. Relationships between China and the ASEAN nations would need to be much more tense than they are at present. While it's possible to imagine that some kind of short punitive action in the event of poorly managed escalation couldn't be ruled out, that would seem unlikely to reach the threshold that would lead to ADF involvement, especially in combat operations. Nevertheless, these contingencies require close intelligence monitoring to alert the government to the potential need to respond.

The policy implications are that Australia should continue to nurture its political and defence relationships with the Southeast Asian countries, including by giving an emphasis to combined maritime and air operations with them, and their command and control. It's neither realistic nor appropriate to expect that Australia would command such operations, as the central issue would be the sovereignty of the country in whose interests we were engaged. Nevertheless, we could expect to have a close level of involvement in high-level command and control.

Indonesia merits special mention. It's geographically closest to Australia, and its government's policies would be a major consideration in operations in which Australia's interests were at serious risk. It has a large population and economic potential and a cultural predisposition to refuse to accept any Chinese attempts at hegemony. Its Natuna islands stand on the front line of Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Australia should give priority to increasing our political and defence engagement with Indonesia.

In the final analysis, in the event of a serious threat to Indonesia from China, we would be able to bring to bear the long-range deterrence strike capabilities designed for the more immediate defence of Australia, were the Australian Government so inclined, and were the Indonesian Government to conclude that such support were appropriate.

REGIONAL OPERATIONS— THE SOUTH PACIFIC

A persistent theme in Australian strategic policy is the importance of ensuring that the South Pacific doesn't become dominated by a power that has hostile intent towards Australia. It wouldn't be in our interests for China to establish military ports or other bases in the South Pacific (or 'commercial' facilities that could be rapidly turned to military use), or to establish hegemony over the governments of the island nations. The promotion of Australia's interests will require continued and focused diplomatic and economic effort, such as has been set out in the government's Pacific Step-up policy.²⁰

In the immediate future, however, operations to provide humanitarian relief or, if invited, aid to the civil power are much more likely than those designed to counter the actions of a hostile major power. Implications for preparedness should be drawn more from the former than from the latter. The habits of cooperation and consultation built up over many years through economic and military assistance, including the Defence Cooperation Program, would form a strong basis on which to build in the event that the islands' and Australia's interests came under serious threat. Because the resources of the Pacific island states are limited, it's more conceivable that Australia would take a leadership role in military operations there than in Southeast Asia, and the potential contribution of the Australian Army would be more important. Our proximity to the South Pacific, and the vulnerability of China's long logistic lines of resupply, need to be a factor in our defence planning.

OTHER CONTINGENCIES

Other contingencies that could gain in relevance include those relating to Japan and India. They could arise through future commitments undertaken through the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue, especially if China's behaviours continue to require yet closer cooperation between the leading democracies of the Indo-Pacific in response. Closer security relationships with Japan and India, and with Indonesia, would increase in importance if the US were to reduce its commitment to the area—which is not currently seen as likely.²¹ The focus of cooperation would again be maritime, including surveillance and intelligence, and in the case of India would underline the importance of the Cocos/Keeling Islands as a forward operating air base in the eastern Indian Ocean. Regarding Japan, we should build on our increasingly close relations and our shared interests and values.

THE CHINA CONTINGENCY

Within the timescales addressed in this paper, we exclude the theoretical contingency of a full-scale Chinese attack or an attempt to invade Australia. For that to occur, the fundamental strategic order in the region would have to have collapsed. Other potential adversaries of China—for instance, Taiwan, South Korea or Japan—would have been much closer and more geostrategically significant, and, therefore, more attractive targets for Beijing. In addition, given the nature of our close alliance relationship with the US, we would expect—and China couldn't confidently exclude—that there would be decisive and large-scale intervention by Washington on our behalf in such a scenario.

The sort of contingencies involving China we consider to be more credible involve escalating threats and coercion. For instance, a Chinese naval taskforce might decide to 'teach Australia a lesson'. It could seek directly to threaten our strategic space by aggressively operating within our 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone and inside our 12-nautical-mile territorial seas or perhaps even threatening our offshore islands and territories. Were China in those circumstances already to have attained access to a military base in such a location as Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu, its capacity to project serious force directly against us would be considerably higher. In our consideration of timescales, we don't consider the circumstances in which we would be involved in sustained high-intensity conflict unless Beijing had access to such a military base that could enable its logistical resupply. Under such circumstances, the extent to which the US would come to our defence would clearly depend upon whether it were already heavily committed elsewhere—such as around Taiwan.

THE POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES

There are three principal ways in which Australia relies on the US for its security:

- America's commitment to stability in the Indo-Pacific, in particular with respect to Taiwan, South Korea and Japan
- Australia's privileged access to American military technology and intelligence, and assurances with respect to assistance at times of crisis, as set out in the ANZUS Treaty
- the assurance of extended nuclear deterrence (which isn't discussed further in this paper).

The election of Joe Biden as President of the US, and the new level of control by the Democratic Party in the US Congress, have removed much of the uncertainty and volatility that characterised US foreign policy during the term of Donald Trump as President. For all that, it's important to acknowledge that US policies towards China are now basically bipartisan and have become much more realistic about strategic competition with China and much less accommodating. On the other hand, we must also keep in mind that the eventual election of a Trump-like Republican President could well turn the settings of US foreign policy back towards those of the Trump era, or towards more general isolationism.

Nevertheless, for the next few years, Australia can be confident of the strength of its relationship with the US.²² Further, even if the US were to demand that its allies in the Pacific take more responsibility for their own security, Australia would be well placed to build on the impressive range of capabilities that we already have or are planning to acquire. (This observation assumes that we would retain our high-level access to US defence technology and intelligence, and to Washington's policy community.)

It will be vital for America to leave the leadership of the CCP in no doubt about the strength of its commitment to stability in the Indo-Pacific. That will reduce the risk of miscalculation and the prospects, therefore, of the use of military force. In the event that the level of US commitment became questionable (if, for example, the US were to become more inward-looking), the levels of risk would increase significantly. The security landscape of the Indo-Pacific would change radically, as those nations that were strongly affected by such developments, especially in the North Pacific, adopted security policies to reflect the higher demands that defence of their sovereignty now required.²³

In brief, it's important for Australia to have a clear picture of the potential limits to American support. Even with the current strength of the alliance, we must recognise that competing demands for US-sourced military communications, intelligence, weapons and maintenance spares during periods of tension or combat could leave Australia at a disadvantage. That would be even more the case were the alliance to become weaker or more questionable. Higher levels of Australian self-reliance would be a hedge against such possibilities. It's reassuring that such increases are a focus of the 2020 Force Structure Plan (FSP).²⁴

Even so, it must be acknowledged that Australia will remain vitally dependent on US support. For example, the operational effectiveness of the RAAF's Joint Strike Fighter and Growler Super Hornet electronic warfare aircraft is critically dependent on the US for operational mission data and that data's frequent updates.

Self-reliance within the context of the alliance with the US isn't a new issue for Australia. It was discussed at some length in the 1976 and 1987 Defence White Papers, for example.²⁵ The issue now is how far down this path to go and where to strike a balance between cost and risk in today's more demanding strategic circumstances. Issues that need further attention include assessments of whether current and planned holdings of weapons and maintenance spares are consistent with realistic assumptions about their supply from the US within warning times for the more serious contingencies that are now credible.

BEYOND THE MEDIUM TERM

There remains the need to discuss force expansion and mobilisation beyond the medium term if there were a further serious deterioration in our strategic circumstances and a risk of major assault on the Australian homeland. As in the analysis of earlier decades, there's the challenge of developing a convincing conceptual framework for such a turn of events.

On the one hand, Australia's strategic geography continues to make it a difficult country to attack by conventional military means. Further, the amphibious forces needed for such operations would be large and vulnerable to counterattack, and the associated military skills difficult to acquire. Resupply would be a challenge. Australia would be expected to resist such assaults with the highest level of commitment.

On the other hand, if such assaults were to be attempted, even at a level designed to inflict damage or humiliation rather than to seek surrender, the consequences for Australia would be severe. Such possibilities aren't irrational, and they have to be part of Defence's planning base now.

The possibility of assault through aggressive cyberattack (discussed above) or long-range cruise missile attack also needs to be part of the contemporary planning basis. Beyond the shorter term, there needs to be analysis of the risk of attack by non-nuclear ballistic missiles.

The prospect of major attack would require an expansion of the ADF and other defence and security elements, such as intelligence, and the mobilisation of industry. This has been part of the conceptual basis for defence planning for the past 50 years through the concept of the 'core force and expansion base', but, in the absence of the need to implement a major expansion of the ADF, little has been done to prepare for such an eventuality.

Current experience with the modernisation of the ADF shows that new warships, submarines and combat aircraft (all of which would play the central part in operations in defence of the homeland) can take many years to acquire—much more than in previous decades. Yet it's barely conceivable that more wouldn't be required in the event of serious strategic deterioration. If the timely acquisition of more of those key capabilities were not to be possible, the idea of force expansion would have to be abandoned, and either the planned-for peacetime force would have to be enlarged or a significantly greater strategic risk that the ADF would be unable to meet the challenges would have to be taken.

In any expansion, timeliness would be of the essence. While there are important capability developments set out in the 2020 DSU and the 2020 FSP, there's still the sense that implementation is proceeding without any particular time imperatives. As has often been observed, the ninth and final Hunter-class frigate won't enter service until about 2040, and the twelfth and final Attack-class submarine not until 2050 or so. At this stage, Defence is only developing options to increase supplies of munitions, and funding for the recapitalisation of the Reserves (who ought to have a critical role in increased preparedness and force expansion) doesn't start until 2030. As discussed above, there appears to be little provision in the shorter term for significant stocks of sustainment spares, although that isn't entirely clear.²⁶

There are, of course, constraints on how quickly such plans can be implemented. Funding levels are limited; Defence's capacity quickly to develop programs of sufficient maturity to withstand public scrutiny is finite; and the capacity of industry to respond is also limited. Nevertheless, there are grounds for concern that the implementation of the 2020 FSP is proceeding at a pace more typical of Australia's earlier and more benign strategic circumstances than those of today. Timeliness of implementation is already a critical factor and would become even more so in the event of further deterioration in our strategic circumstances.

Remotely operated vehicles and autonomous vehicles offer alternatives to additional crewed platforms, with examples being the Air Force's Loyal Wingman initiative and the possibility of the Boeing Orca unmanned undersea vehicle.²⁷ Given sufficient peacetime preparation and experience, those platforms could well offer a valuable avenue for force expansion that would be timely and effective, and most likely far less expensive than the alternatives.

The need to plan for timely and effective mobilisation is a serious issue that requires more attention than is possible in this paper. The requirement isn't for a detailed plan but rather the development of principles that would be applied to the development of the force structure and defence policy for industry. A good place to start would be to identify those steps that should be taken now to ensure that force expansion and mobilisation would achieve their goals.

NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

To state the obvious: contingencies of the nature discussed in this paper would require a national response—not just from Defence and the ADF, but from the whole of government and industry. It's important, therefore, to plan accordingly. The task is to develop plans that, if implemented, would facilitate the timely increase and sustainability of the higher rates of effort that responses to contingencies would require, within the machinery of government and across the nation more broadly. A particular challenge is to strike the right balance between overprescription and inadequate preparation.

Such analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but some important principles can be set out. Mechanisms for the expansion of the ADF and Australian Public Service need to be identified, including steps to allow the expeditious issuing of security clearances, especially for an expanded workforce in policy and intelligence. Procedures for high-level crisis management within the machinery of government need to be reviewed and amended if necessary. Ministers need to be involved in such planning, irrespective of the distraction of short-term political issues. The relationship with industry needs to be sufficiently strong and clear so that all parties understand the likely nature of increased demand that contingencies would bring and industry's ability to respond. Potential bottlenecks and ways to work around them should be identified.

The challenges of crisis management wouldn't be confined to Australia, and we should continue to ensure that our relationships with potential coalition partners would be sufficient to build on to meet the demands that contingencies would impose. To test the ability of the international community to handle crises and contingencies, Australia could consider conducting theoretical war games with selected overseas partners. With respect to the US, there's a case for considering more detailed operational planning for some contingencies (the 'operationalisation' of ANZUS, at least in part).²⁸

Defence has already embarked upon a study of mobilisation, but the results aren't publicly available. It would be useful if more could be put into the public domain, at least at the level of general principles.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A National Intelligence Warning Staff

In view of the radical contraction in defence warning time, Australia needs to appoint a National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Warning. In the Cold War, which was a highly demanding era in which warning of a surprise attack was a critical priority, the CIA had an NIO for Warning whose sole task was to scrutinise daily the incoming evidence from intelligence indicators and subject them to critical assessment.

In Australia, such an NIO, together with the position's National Intelligence Warning Staff, could be located in the Office of National Intelligence. It would be important, however, that the Intelligence Warning Staff include officials from various disciplines—and not least intelligence officers skilled in the interpretation of political, strategic and military warning indicators, some of whom should also have a policy background.

An alternative would be to locate the NIO in the Defence organisation and place it under the Deputy Secretary for Strategy or the three-star officer now in charge of all Defence intelligence. Wherever its location, the NIO needs to have influential access at the highest levels of decision-making—including briefing the National Security Committee of Cabinet in times of impending crisis.

A Directorate of Net Assessments

In our view, Defence now needs a Directorate of Net Assessments to rigorously test credible conflict contingencies, simulating both blue- and red-force capabilities. This will require the testing of the range of credible contingencies identified in this paper, with particular emphasis on those potential contingencies in our immediate region in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

The contingency of Taiwan requires priority separate assessment because of the increased military pressure with which China is now threatening Taiwan and the raised prospects of conflict with the US. We have noted that it isn't credible for Australia to imagine that a military crisis involving China and the US may not occur in the Taiwan Strait. Nor is it credible for Canberra to believe that we could get away without fighting alongside our US ally.

We also consider that the prospect of a military emergency in the South China Sea involving our warships needs to be seriously analysed with a clear understanding of the implications of risk.

While it's unlikely that China would directly attack our continent, we must prepare for credible contingencies involving Chinese military coercion in our immediate strategic space. That coercion could involve the threatened use of military force, including from future Chinese military bases located to our north and east. Ignoring such probabilities risks strategic surprise involving our key national security interests.

If the Directorate of Net Assessments is to have relevance, it will need to simulate high-level political and policy decision-making in real time. Without such time-urgent inputs, it won't be possible to play other than theoretical war games.

The Directorate of Net Assessments could be in the Strategic Policy area of Defence, and with the understanding that it must involve a wide range of talent and skills—civilian and military alike—extending across all domains of conflict.

For comparison, the US Pentagon has had an Office of Net Assessment since 1973. The office has continually provided long-term comparative assessments of trends, key competitors, risks, opportunities and future prospects of US military capability. Those assessments are highly classified and provide strategic-level management insights to the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Combatant Commanders, as well as National Security Council staff, the National Intelligence Council, the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department.

Priority for long-range missile strike

We consider that, in Australia's new and demanding strategic environment, priority needs to be given to creating a posture of defensive deterrence. This means giving priority to equipping the ADF with a variety of long-range strike missiles, including anti-ship, air-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles. According to ASPI, the current 2020 FSP includes missiles to be acquired out to beyond 2040 and costing in the order of \$100 billion.²⁹ We now need to think in terms of missiles with strike ranges in thousands, as distinct from only hundreds, of kilometres.

In particular, the 2020 FSP specifically identifies high-speed missile systems to provide government with more deterrence options. The 2020 DSU notes that the introduction of additional, longer range weapon systems will be critical for the ADF to be able to deliver credible deterrent effects.

We consider that long-range missile systems are needed to provide Australia with a decisive deterrence edge in the coming decades. We note here that the ADF no longer has F-111 long-range strike bombers and that the new Attack-class submarines won't be available until well into the 2030s.

There needs to be an increase in weapons inventory across the ADF to ensure that stockholdings and resupply arrangements are adequate to sustain combat operations—including in high-intensity conflict—if global supply chains are at risk or disrupted. In this context, a sovereign guided weapons manufacturing capability, along the lines that the 2020 FSP has directed Defence to explore, would provide a second layer underpinning our posture of deterrence.

Assessing our US ally

Traditionally, governments make few intelligence assessments about their allies. In the past, it's been considered improper to make assessments about the strengths and vulnerabilities of the US. It would be irresponsible, given the recent domestic turmoil and unpredictability in Washington, not to undertake a well-informed analysis of where we think the US is going in its confrontation with China and Washington's support of allies, including the role of extended nuclear deterrence.

We need to accept in our strategic thinking that America is now a more inward-looking country that will foreseeably give more attention to its domestic social and political challenges. It also needs to be remembered that the US has—from time to time—undergone severe bouts of isolationism.³⁰ We don't think that's likely to happen under the Biden administration, but it could recur under a differently motivated presidency.

We need prudent analysis about how the US will react to its own warning indicators of potential military attack and what it would expect of Australia. In our own broader region, we can't afford not to be fully informed about US contingencies in Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula, so we need to assess US military capabilities as well as Washington's intentions.

Increased preparedness and force expansion

The government now needs both to invest in the increased preparedness of the ADF for contingencies credible in the short to medium term and develop plans for force expansion and mobilisation beyond the medium term.

The challenges of short- and medium-term contingencies would be formidable: round-the-clock operations sustained over months rather than days, with increased demands on fuel supplies, aircrew, munitions and maintenance spares. Ministers need to be left in no doubt about the risks relating to the ADF's ability to move quickly to higher states of alert (readiness) and then to sustain operations, including with respect to timely resupply from the US, potentially at a time when US forces would also be operating at a higher tempo. Given the likely maritime nature of those contingencies, priority needs to be given to investing in increased preparedness for the Navy and the Air Force.

For the first time since World War II, Defence needs to also take seriously the conditions under which force expansion and mobilisation would happen. It wouldn't be acceptable to defer such consideration until Australia were within warning time of a serious military attack against us or our key interests.

Planning for timely and effective mobilisation doesn't at this stage require a detailed plan but rather the development of principles that would be applied to the development of the force structure and defence policy for industry. The place to start would be to identify those steps that should be taken now to ensure that force expansion and mobilisation would achieve their goals.

NOTES

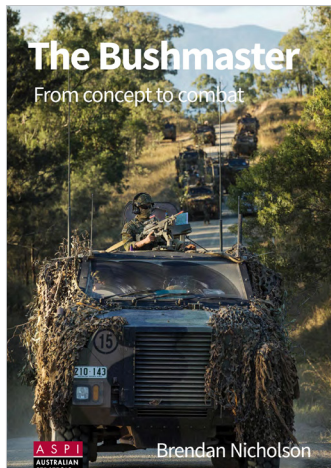
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- 15 'We will support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with longstanding American commitments.' President Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, White House, March 2021, 21.
- 16 It's worth remembering that Taiwan has established a very strong position as a global supplier of advanced semiconductors, including for US security applications, and also with China as a major customer. See, for example, Elena Yi-Ching Ho, 'Semiconductors as a shield for Taiwan?', *The Strategist*, 16 March 2021, [online](#); Kate Sullivan-Walker, 'The semiconductor industry is where politics gets real for Taiwan', *The Interpreter*, July 2020, [online](#).
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	Australian Defence Force
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DSU	2020 Defence Strategic Update
FSP	2020 Force Structure Plan
JORN	Jindalee Operational Radar Network
NIO	National Intelligence Officer
PLA	People's Liberation Army
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
UN	United Nations

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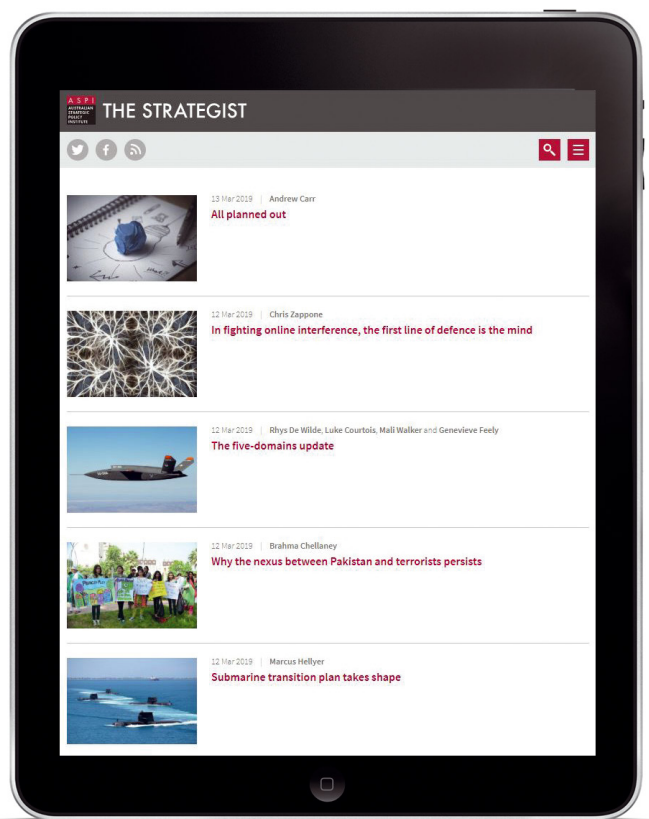


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Deterrence through denial

A strategy for an era of reduced warning time

Australia now needs to implement serious changes to how warning time is considered in defence planning. The need to plan for reduced warning time has implications for the Australian intelligence community, defence strategic policy, force structure priorities, readiness and sustainability. Important changes will also be needed with respect to personnel, stockpiles of missiles and munitions, and fuel supplies. We can no longer assume that Australia will have time gradually to adjust military capability and preparedness in response to emerging threats. In other words, there must be a new approach in Defence to managing warning, capability and preparedness, and detailed planning for rapid expansion and sustainment.

This paper addresses those issues, recognising that they're a revolutionary break with the past era of what were much more comfortable assumptions about threats to Australia. Considering the complexity of the issues involved, we have identified further areas for research, including at the classified level.