

Marles's Defence Strategic Review—an exploding suitcase of challenges to resolve by March 2023

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Introduction

There's a lot in a name. Before the election, the now Labor government told us it would commission a Defence Posture Review to look at how the Australian military is positioned and enabled to operate in our region as the security environment requires.¹

Then, having had the opportunity for comprehensive briefings in government, Prime Minister Albanese and his Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Richard Marles, told us on 3 August that what's now being done is a deeper, wider piece of work called the Defence Strategic Review.² That's good news because the challenges and issues the government needs to confront in the defence field are beyond just basing and positioning the ADF.

So, if the two independent reviewers, Stephen Smith and Angus Houston, are to do what the Prime Minister has asked and 'examine force structure, force posture and preparedness, and investment prioritisation, to ensure Defence has the right capabilities to meet our growing strategic needs', they have large challenges to confront and advise on.³

The first is to notice what's changed about Australia's security environment since 2016, which is when all the plans for the capabilities now being acquired by Defence were made and announced in the 2016 Defence White Paper.⁴ Most of the force structure proposals in that document were first set out in the 2009 Defence White Paper⁵ when Angus Houston was the Chief of the Defence Force and restated in the 2013 Defence White Paper released by Stephen Smith.⁶ Our security situation has changed greatly since them.



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Since 2016, and even since the Morrison government's 2020 Defence Strategic Update,⁷ we've experienced a rolling maul of confronting developments for our security and for the collective security of our close allies and partners. They include the return of war to Europe with Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the nasty realisation that the strategic partnership between Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China is only strengthening as that war proceeds, and the demonstration of Xi's willingness to use China's military in increasingly belligerent and aggressive ways in the South China Sea, around Taiwan and near Japan.

Add in the now present effects of climate change domestically and in our region and the disasters and dislocation that it's already causing. Then there's the shattering of confidence in the reliability of what, in the world of Covid-19, coercive trade measures and the fracturing effects of Putin's war, seem now to be quaintly called 'global supply chains' and global markets. That matters to Australia, and in particular to our Defence organisation, because global—or at least extended international—supply chains are the basis for most of Defence's support arrangements.

But, on top of all that, the most disturbing and dangerous development for Australia's security is China's now open strategic intent to play a direct and growing role in our near region, made concrete by the Sogavare–Beijing security pact signed earlier this year.⁸

In the light of these changes, it's now obvious that, whatever security assistance Australia will get from the US and other partners in times of crisis, like Ukraine, we'll need our own means to act in our own defence as a precondition for assistance from others.

That's true whether it's our key ally, America, or other trusted partners such as the Quad's Japan and India, or our other AUKUS partner, the UK. So, the Defence Strategic Review must provide the decisions for the government to make that will put real substance on the notion of self-reliance within an alliance construct. That hasn't been done seriously since the Dobb Review in the late 1980s.

The review must give Marles what he needs to provide practical, urgent direction to Defence in four big areas:

1. Climate change and the ADF's inescapable role
2. China's direct security challenge in Australia's near region
3. New ways to increase Australian military power quickly
4. The danger of prioritising integration in all things

1. Climate change and the ADF's inescapable role

The first is on the implications of climate change domestically and in our near region for the Defence organisation. Southeast Asia, Australia and the South Pacific are already 'disaster central' globally, and the now real effects of climate change are making that worse, bringing compounding and more frequent natural disasters.⁹

Climate change is a driver of a damaged, weakened Southeast Asia, which is the photographic negative of the prosperous and stable Southeast Asia projected in Julia Gillard's 2012 *Australia in the Asian century* White Paper.¹⁰

No matter what broader national resilience is built in Australia and no matter what progress is made in Southeast Asian nations and the South Pacific, there's a growing demand for the ADF to play a role in disaster relief and recovery over the remainder of this decade. Whatever the Defence leadership at the time thinks, every Australian prime minister and every state and territory premier and chief minister will look to the ADF as a source of assistance and reassurance during such disasters.

Defence doesn't want to do this work and insists that it won't structure, train or equip to do so, because it must focus on its core task of war fighting.¹¹ The logical problem here is that, by not making a budget and structural case for what the ADF needs to do disaster relief well, it puts itself in the position of having to divert people and systems designed for war to a rolling program handling civil crises and risks failing at those tasks through lack of capacity. This approach will undercut the ADF's war-fighting capability at a time when it must be grown and protected—and damage the force's reputation.

Recruiting, training, structuring and equipping a part of the ADF for this growing disaster relief role will best protect its larger war-fighting elements, and also bring a more diverse workforce into the organisation because of the different motivations of disaster relief work.

So, on helping Australia and the region deal with the effects of climate change, the review will need to give Richard Marles the material to direct Defence to do what it doesn't want to do, but must do, and build the public case for that.

An entirely different and probably less internally controversial agenda relevant to climate change that the review can fast track for Defence is Defence's own adoption of renewable-energy systems. As a recent ASPI report set out with great clarity, this can include the electrification of much of its vehicle fleets and deployable systems that reduce the logistics tail required compared to fossil-fuel-based approaches.¹² It can also set out the path for partnership with Australia's airlines as they and the Air Force take up the opportunities from sustainable aircraft fuels. The net effect of this will be to make the ADF more energy secure in both its activities here at home and on deployment, while still using energy-dense fossil fuels where they're uniquely useful—such as in F-35 aircraft.

2. China's direct security challenge in Australia's near region

For all the talk of the complex strategic environment Australia finds itself in, there's an enormous and unfortunate shaft of clarity: it's now clear that China intends to play a direct and growing security role in our near region. The Sogavare–Beijing security pact is the most undeniable indicator of that, although the first attempt by China's State Councillor Wang Yi to get 10 Pacific nations to sign a regional security pact with Beijing was an even larger explicit statement of intent.¹³ And Australia is already experiencing aggression from PLA Navy ships transiting close to us on their way to the South Pacific.¹⁴

This is a fundamental shift in Australia's strategic environment that ends decades of defence planning based on producing a force for the unexpected, because tangible direct threats were blissfully not there. China's direct security challenge in Australia's near region must refocus Defence's concepts, posture and structure. It would be a strikingly advantageous coincidence if a force designed back in 2009 for an entirely different future was right for the one we now face.¹⁵

We have a need to deter, oppose and defeat Chinese military forces operating in our near region, whatever else the ADF might do, including in a broader war involving China and Australia's allies and partners.

This produces a need for a return to 'self-reliance within an alliance construct' but in an even more practical and larger way than at the time of the Dobb Review.¹⁶ Ukraine teaches us a key lesson here: partners help those who have a capacity to help themselves. If Ukraine's military had been unable to put up a credible defence in the early days of the war and show that it could sustain that defence, support from the EU, the US and NATO wouldn't have occurred. Defence taking this lesson seriously and combining it with the new direct security challenge from China in our near region should move us decisively away from the previous decades' mindset of forces that plug into larger US constructs, with the luxurious assurance that the US would provide all the shortfalls, consumables and enablers that we don't have to operate the ADF in sustained combat.

And, to do that, a small force such as the ADF needs to get some mass and survivability from investing in the low-cost consumables of conflict—and the systems and weapons that can be produced in Australia, relatively inexpensively, at scale—to be used, lost and replaced. Australian industry, including small and medium-sized enterprises such as Defendtex¹⁷ and EOS,¹⁸ are much better placed to produce such disposable, replaceable systems than they are to build next-generation ships, submarines and aircraft.

We see others responding to high tempo PLA presence in places like the South China Sea, East China Sea and around Taiwan by engaging in their own high tempo activities that are wearing out their small forces' people and advanced systems like fighters, submarines and ships. Shadowing and surveilling PLA ships and aircraft in our near region with numbers of small, cheap, disposable airborne drones and surface and sub-surface uncrewed autonomous vehicles (UAVs) lets Beijing be the one incurring the costs to operate crewed systems at a distance and us be the ones identifying their vulnerabilities and challenging their extended supply line in a way that doesn't damage our own forces

Making sure the Army has clear roles in our actual region, and that its structures and concepts for operation trace to those roles, can help prevent hypothetical ideas about uncertain futures driving major investment decisions.

Aside from just capabilities, the review can give the ADF and components within it the licence and imperative to experiment with forces and concepts that look very different from the traditional order of battle and traditional concepts of operations. The model that the US Marine Corps is implementing of small, dispersed, low-profile strike forces equipped with lethal systems such as long-range anti-ship missiles is one example,¹⁹ as an alternative to the heavy footprint of an exposed, fixed, forward operating base in the region that needs a heavy force protection wrapping around it. Successes from experiments that are done at small scale and at fairly junior levels across the services using new approaches, systems and concepts can be invested in and introduced into service rapidly.

3. New ways to increase Australian military power quickly

Defence can't expect public support for an increased budget without showing that it will use new ways to increase the power of the ADF quickly.

The empowered 'czar' model used for the national Covid-19 vaccination rollout under John Frewen²⁰ and the Nuclear Powered Submarine Taskforce under Jonathan Mead²¹ are two precedents that seem useful. So is the way Defence worked in a tight team with deployed ADF people in Afghanistan, the Defence Science and Technology Group and companies such as Thales to rapidly create improved capability to counter improvised explosive devices (IEDs)²² and greater Bushmaster capability.

Defence needs to take a lesson from the airlines when they were faced with low-cost start-ups such as Ryanair and easyJet:²³ you can't streamline and cost-cut a premium outfit into a low-cost, fast-moving outfit. Further 'waterfront' reform of Defence's force design and acquisition processes will continue to deliver only limited efficiencies that don't meet the urgency of our times.²⁴ Qantas rapidly realised that starting an entirely new enterprise built from the ground up as a low-cost, streamlined outfit entirely unencumbered by the practices of the big premium airline was the only way to succeed—and Jetstar is the result. So, Defence needs to stand up small, fast-moving alternative ways of acquiring military power, unconstrained by the big dense business processes used for larger programs that dominate force development and the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group.

A big idea here is about AUKUS implementation. Everything in the AUKUS agenda aside from the nuclear submarines is an area of high technology that's proliferating in the civilian world but not permeating into the hands of our military with any great haste, or it's an area of research and development that Defence has been conducting with civilian research sector partners for decades but has yet to turn into practical capability. Hypersonics is an example.

An implementation approach for the non-nuclear-submarine AUKUS elements (notably artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum technologies, undersea systems other than submarines, and hypersonics)²⁵ is to stand up the Aussie DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) described by Peter Jennings and Bob Clark and hand AUKUS implementation to that empowered, effective new organisation.²⁶ The US DARPA is a bridge between fast-moving technology and research in the civil sector and the US military—which is exactly what the AUKUS agenda identifies as a growing need of the US, Australia and the UK. A new Aussie DARPA partnering with the US DARPA and with UK partners wouldn't just accelerate delivery on AUKUS, but would also create the institutional machinery to seize new opportunities that would help shift the military balance in the Indo-Pacific before 2025 and beyond.

4. The danger of prioritising integration in all things

Integration and, worse, interchangeability as a primary goal is a mistake. But an integrated joint force has been a core mantra inside Defence for a couple of decades now,²⁷ and the 'interchangeability' of Australian and US systems, platforms and people is a new and more demanding variant of that mantra.²⁸

There's a reason why seamless integration even across the ADF has yet to be achieved: it's fiendishly difficult and complicated. (The Army's struggling digitisation program, which is over a decade and a half old and still not close to being achieved, is one example.²⁹ The enormous Enterprise Resource Program is another example of hugely ambitious organisational integration that's both costly and slow moving at a time when resources are scarce and time is short.)³⁰

The US is further from this integrated defence nirvana than we are, even if integration within its individual services is impressive.³¹ That's probably an issue driven by scale as much as by anything else, but it does tell us that the aspiration of making 'every sensor a shooter and every shooter a sensor' in a seamless web across domains, services and legacy and new systems remains an aspiration, not a reality.

Prioritising the deep integration of anything new with everything in the broader force is a fundamental brake on increases in our military power. The Ukrainians have shown that they can adopt new weapons and new enabling systems—Javelin, HIMARS³² and Elon Musk's Starlink terminals³³—and use them extraordinarily effectively without the complex and slow back-end integration that we insist upon. A ruthless focus on what actually needs to be integrated to achieve very clear purposes in realistic scenarios is a much better path forward.

Context and existing challenges

The exploding suitcase that's the defence budget

Before the review and reviewers can even tangle with this difficult set of ideas, though, they'll need to discover what Richard Marles and Anthony Albanese must already know: despite the growing real spend on defence since 2016 (\$32.4 billion then,³⁴ \$48.6 billion this year, growing to \$70 billion by 2030), the current Defence plan is unaffordable. That's because, while the funding boundary was set over those years in 2016 and has been agreed to by both the previous and current governments, new major investments have been added to the mix without any change to funding. The whole set of AUKUS initiatives is on this list—not just the eight nuclear submarines that will clearly cost much more than the diesel-electric French submarine design that they're to replace, but also all the other elements of AUKUS that are to be acquired to rapidly increase the partners' military power, including cyber capabilities for our militaries and weapons such as hypersonic missiles.

The Morrison government also announced spending of \$9.9 billion this decade to grow the size and capabilities of Australia's cyber and signals intelligence agency, the Australian Signals Directorate.³⁵ That's meant to be funded from the same magic pudding that's the Defence budget model from 2016.

A further example of the exploding suitcase that's the Defence budget is the work to grow the size of the ADF by 18,500 by 2040. That requires an average net increase in the number of people in the military of about 1,000 people per year. Over the past few years, Defence has managed a net increase of only about 300 people a year.³⁶ The salary and conditions of our men and women in the military are already attractive, so it's not just about tossing more money at individuals. But, in a very competitive market for the talented men and women our military needs, the experience to date shows that new approaches are needed. They will cost money.

No one is going to have an easy time arguing for the defence budget to increase unless the ways the money will be spent and capability acquired are different from the very slow capability development and delivery process used by our Defence organisation, which was suitable when credible conflict was not a near-term thing to worry about. We need to see a lot more that looks like the way our forces in Afghanistan were equipped rapidly with what they needed to deal with the evolving and dangerous threat from IEDs³⁷—and a lot less of approaches like that taken for the already delayed and troubled Hunter frigate program.

Debates about whether or not to spend 2% of GDP on defence are already overtaken by events. The defence budget line committed to by the new government has the budget growing to well over 2% by 2030. That was calculated using much rosier predictions for Australia's rate of economic growth between now and 2030 than look likely in the darker international economic times we're already in. It was also calculated using much lower inflationary expectations than we're experiencing now. So, just to mark time and maintain real purchasing power, the defence budget needs to be increased.

Once they've waded through these uncomfortable truths, Stephen Smith and Angus Houston can then sketch out how the government might shape Defence to meet the pressing and urgent challenge Australia faces from the now direct security threat China poses in our near region. This must change how our military is structured and operates and enable our strategic partners to operate from and through Australia in larger and more effective ways than they can now.

Lessons from Ukraine

Some themes have been referred to briefly in the four key challenges. However, one simple theme for our military is that it must have the ‘consumables of conflict’ it needs to operate and fight if it has to. Right now, Defence’s support arrangements for our military are still caught in the era of globalised economics—relying on extended and vulnerable global supply chains for key consumables such as missiles, spares and low-cost but essential systems like armed and unarmed drones. How critical it is to have those in high volume when fighting a modern war is on display every day in Ukraine, as is the fact that even well-resourced militaries such as the US’s need supporting production capacity to grow.

But we also need to be clear-minded about what lessons from the war in Ukraine are not relevant to Australia. Fighting a large-scale land war of attrition with a land power such as Russia, fortunately, isn’t part of Australia’s future when you look at a map of where we live. Neither is refighting the battles of Iraq, such as the urban second battle of Fallujah.³⁸

So, that gives the reviewers room to re-examine a major part of the previous government’s defence plan: the wisdom of spending somewhere between \$18 billion and \$27 billion to acquire 450 heavily armoured infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) for the Army. That’s in addition to the Army’s 75 Abrams tanks³⁹ and the 200 heavily armoured combat reconnaissance vehicles already on order,⁴⁰ along with the thousands of ‘protected vehicles’ in the Army’s Bushmaster and planned Hawkei fleets.⁴¹

A radical reduction in the numbers of IFVs wouldn’t just help to deal with the enormous financial pressures in Defence. It would also make sense because Australia’s military simply can’t deploy, sustain and support more than 700 heavy armoured vehicles—or even a fraction of that number—in our region. Nowhere in our region other than the Korean Peninsula or the India–Pakistan border makes sense as a place where large-scale land battles requiring those capabilities will take place. And the Australian Army shouldn’t be structured for either of those scenarios.

So, the good news is there are some savings to be had by changing obvious flaws in Defence’s current plans. The Army command will be well aware of the many fundamental problems that proceeding with the plan for a heavy-armour army brings. One is that the ‘dream number’ of 450 IFVs is almost certainly unaffordable even for the existing \$18–27 billion budget, so the Army leadership no doubt has plans to offer as small a reduction as possible to avoid others taking decisions it likes less. That means the review is likely to be offered a reduced scope for the project—something like 300 IFVs—but not a radical reduction or rethink. If that happens, it will mean no major savings being made available for priorities more directly relevant to security in our region.

A further lesson from Putin’s war comes from the Russian side. There’s way too much focus on the technical specifications of systems and platforms and way too little on how those systems can be sustained and supplied during a lengthy conflict. The Russians have demonstrated that having high-performance systems that they can’t employ—such as their most advanced main battle tank⁴² and 5th generation fighter⁴³—broadly delivers very little advantage. The war is proving that it’s the logistics capacity to operate even dated systems that’s fundamental.

Therefore, the review needs to set out the highly non-sexy work required to ensure that the ADF we have now can be deployed, sustained and resupplied so that it can operate during conflict for an extended period. And, where there are real gaps in those arrangements, they must be acknowledged and urgently addressed.

That submarine problem

The bad news is that the transition from the current Collins-class submarine to the future AUKUS nuclear submarine is looking a lot like the Air Force’s experience with the transition from the ‘classic’ Hornet F/A-18 fighter to the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Back then, Defence’s plan was to upgrade the classic Hornet to keep the aircraft operational and capable until the new JSFs turned up.

Defence persisted with that plan even as the delays in the JSF program escalated and as the technical risks and expense in keeping the ageing Hornets became more apparent. It was only the intervention of the then Defence Minister, Brendan Nelson, who stopped believing that the Defence transition plan made sense, that solved the problem by providing the Air Force with 24 Super

Hornets. Those aircraft now provide a hugely valuable complementary air combat capability to the JSF. The major upgrade of the classic Hornets never happened, avoiding great expense and technical and operational risk as a result.

Maybe we need a similar approach to resolve the submarine gap that Marles has said is his top priority. And maybe an option here is to not spend the billions planned by Defence on the Collins upgrade (an extreme technical, budget and operational capability risk) but to instead 'do a Super Hornet' and use that money to buy a 'son of Collins' interim submarine, which could be very like the latest submarines that the original Collins designer has built for the Swedes⁴⁴ and has offered to the Dutch.⁴⁵ Avoiding the pursuit of capability requirements that look eerily like the failed Attack-class submarine would be essential here.

Posture and rethinking

And the reviewers themselves have some rethinking to do. Each had his most intense exposure to the strategic situation and to the arcane issues in our Defence organisation around the late 2000s⁴⁶ and early 2010s.⁴⁷ That's when the force structure plans that Defence is still implementing and still deeply attached to were made. That was also a time when China's aggressive trajectory was much less obvious, and before the fragility of global supply chains was revealed.

Escaping from some of what they think they know from that earlier time is possible—and essential if the review is to help the government and Defence make the changes our current strategic environment demands. It's a case of channelling that line attributed to Winston Churchill when he was accused of hypocrisy: 'When the facts change, I change my mind.'

While the review has been renamed and is no longer the Defence Posture Review, how our military and our defence organisation are positioned to enable military operations is still a core part of the work it must do. Given that our near region has quickly become more dangerous since 2020, it makes no sense for Australia's strategic harbour in our north, Darwin, to be operated by a Chinese company. Instead, Australia needs to end that lease and invest to make Darwin Harbour a facility that will support a growing operational presence by our own military and partners such as the US, Japan, India and the UK.⁴⁸ Similar investment in and rethinking the role of places such as Townsville (for the South Pacific) and Western Australia's Stirling naval base, facing the Indian Ocean, make good sense. And the scope and scale of the Manus island naval base redevelopment could be revised to enable Australian forces to operate from there in support of PNG and other Pacific Island Forum partners.

It's also a disturbingly obvious observation to make that, for all the billions of dollars invested in rebuilding Defence bases and facilities around Australia, not much has been done to harden or protect those facilities, probably because we've faced no direct security threat for so long. There at least needs to be an effort to better protect valuable assets such as advanced fighters and the Wedgetail aircraft with protected shelters, given our new environment. No one wants to wake up and see images of destruction at a place like RAAF Williamtown or RAAF Tindal, as the Russians saw at an airbase in Crimea recently.⁴⁹

Wrapping all this up by March 2023, in time for decisions on the review to be made at the same time as the defining decisions on nuclear submarines in AUKUS,⁵⁰ makes the review very time poor. It reflects Australia's overall security problem: how to make Australia more secure by delivering increased military power quickly this decade, not over the extended, slow, time frames Defence is working to from the 2009, 2013 and 2016 Defence White Papers.

Treating time as a precious resource is a necessary new mindset for Defence, and one that our now more dangerous world requires.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
IED	improvised explosive device
IFV	infantry fighting vehicle
JSF	Joint Strike Fighter
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army

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ISSN 1449-3993

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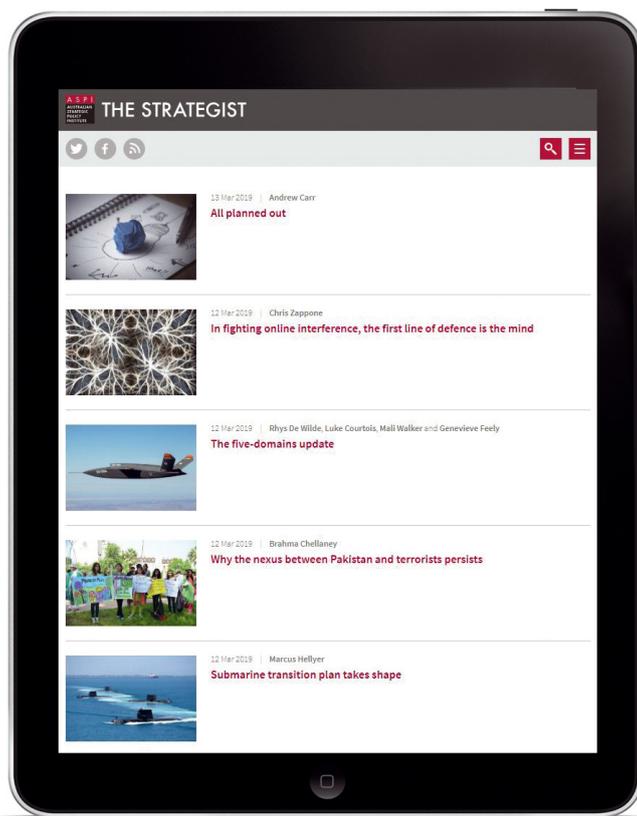


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