



Clockwise from top left: An army ASLAV during the Afghanistan role; a welcome in Townsville for Australia's 2nd Cavalry; taking cover in a simulated rocket attack in Queensland; soldiers in ceremonial role; an RAAF Hercules US and Chinese troops in the Northern Territory; the 2013 navy review in Sydney. Centre: Army helicopter flares

Australia, including an army brigade in the Darwin area, air force bases in Tindal, Learmonth, Curtin and Weipa, and moving the navy's main submarine base from Sydney to Fremantle to be much nearer to likely operating theatres.

There was considerable resistance from some elements of the ADF to these moves to the north and west of the continent. The Howard government developed a hybrid approach recognising Australia's "most important strategic objective" was to be able to defend our territory from direct military attack. It also gave priority from 2001 to expeditionary operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. This led to views in Defence that "come as

you are" expeditionary wars in the Middle East should determine the ADF's force structure and operating priorities.

But we now face a whole new set of strategic demands that require a serious reorientation of the ADF's priorities.

The build-up of highly capable military forces in the region to our north and rising geopolitical tensions should dictate the return of geography to the centre of our force structure planning.

Our area of primary strategic interest should extend from the eastern Indian Ocean to the South Pacific and from Southeast Asia (including the South China Sea) to the waters of Antarctica.

This amounts to about 20 per cent of the Earth's surface, which is

a nontrivial task for an ADF of less than 60,000 people.

It should strongly influence the range and endurance of the equipment to be acquired for the defence force, as well as numbers of platforms required for sustained operations. This means we need to develop a maritime strategy with a heavy investment in having the most technologically advanced navy and air force in our region.

It also demands a change to army, with more focus on our own region of direct strategic concern.

Contrary to the views of some commentators, this does not mean identifying any particular country as a military threat.

In any case, which country would that be? Not Japan or India, which are

democracies. Neither is it any of our neighbours, although we will always need to keep a close eye on developments in Indonesia because of its proximity.

So that leaves China, and are we really going to develop a defence force to fight China?

There are, however, credible contingencies in which we might have to contribute to allied military efforts to counter Chinese coercion, particularly in Southeast Asia, and if necessary to support US-led military operations in Northeast Asia.

There will also be a requirement to develop further our military bases in the north of Australia and to put more effort into our military presence in the west.

And while it will be increasingly

difficult — and more expensive — for us to maintain a clear technological lead, there is no reason we should not have the most potent military force of any medium-sized power in the Asia-Pacific region.

This next white paper must deliver on a bold new maritime strategy for Australia's defence planning. It can do so by refocusing on the relevance of our regional geography and the need for a clear margin of technological advantage in key elements of the ADF's force structure.

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More than \$1 trillion, but why put a figure on it?

Australia / Nov 2015



MARK THOMSON

In the final days of the 2013 election campaign, Tony Abbott promised to boost defence spending to 2 per cent of gross domestic product within a decade. The move was unexpected.

Spending that much of GDP on defence previously had been raised only as an aspiration — something to be achieved if and when circumstances allowed.

Even for a mid-sized economy such as Australia, 2 per cent of GDP is a lot of money. Across the 20-year planning horizon of the forthcoming defence white paper, it amounts to more than \$1 trillion, based on present estimates of inflation and growth.

For more than 18 months, the Department of Defence has been drafting a new defence white paper to explain why this prodigious amount of money is needed and how it will be spent. By all accounts, the document and its 20-year capability plan were close to completion when Malcolm Turnbull replaced Abbott as prime minister. So what now?

Despite continuity in some

areas — such as border security and same-sex marriage — it's increasingly clear that the tone and focus of the government is shifting under Turnbull. The rapid convening of a mini-summit on economic reform was no accident, as the new Prime Minister appears to have adopted Bill Clinton's political maxim from the 1990s: "It's the economy stupid."

And well he may. The latest International Monetary Fund global economic outlook has once again downgraded its growth projections for the world — continuing a trend of downward revision that began in 2010.

Perhaps more important for Australia, China's short to medium-term growth is more uncertain today than at any time since the 2008 financial crisis.

Quite apart from the worrying prospects for the global economy, Australia has yet to adapt to lower commodity prices and reduced mining investment. There's no point pretending that our terms of trade are going to improve soon.

The resources boom left Australia with a structural deficit that demands hard choices about spending and taxation.

But while the economic challenges facing Australia continue to mount, the strategic environment remains just as volatile and uncertain. From Ukraine to Syria, and from the South China Sea to North Korea, developments are as concerning as they are unexpected.

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