

# *The future of Australian defence strategy*

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*Defence strategists have developed a range of alternative defence strategies for Australia, but they point in different directions. Lockyer presents a conceptual framework for evaluating defence strategies; then applies this framework to the strategic options advanced by four leading Australian scholars and finds that no one option passes his test of 'good' strategy. Lockyer concludes by proposing a new Australian defence strategy that would pass his 'good' strategy test.*

**Key words:** defence policy; defence strategy; defence doctrine; strategic interests; strategic objectives; strategic options; strategy evaluation; Indo-Pacific Arc; Australia; China; India.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Australia is in need of a new defence policy and strategy that better reflect the new distribution of regional military power and better respond to the changing threats. Fortunately, Australia's leading strategic thinkers have made many persuasive suggestions; indeed, there is a smorgasbord of different options. The problem is that they all point in very different directions. I will begin by suggesting a new means of evaluating defence strategy options. I will then apply this framework to the leading alternatives. The evaluation technique finds that all the leading defence options have severe limitations. Finally, I will begin to build a new defence strategy for Australia that would pass the test of a 'good' defence strategy. This paper is based upon my recent book *Australia's Defence Strategy: Evaluating Alternatives for a Contested Asia* (Lockyer 2017). If you would like a fuller discussion of anything I touch upon herein, the book would be the place to go.

## **Definitions**

First, we must clarify what we mean by 'defence strategy'. Despite defence strategy being different from 'defence policy' and 'defence doctrine', they are often treated as synonyms in the defence studies literature. It is common, for example, to hear the 'Defence of Australia' approach (Dibb 1986; Defence 1987) referred to as a policy, and/or a strategy, and/or a doctrine – sometimes even by the same author in the same paper. Which is it?

- *Defence policy* is the translation of strategic interests into strategic objectives and the organisation of the military capabilities (e.g. decisions around procurement, basing, budget and force structure).
- *Defence strategy* is application of available military power to mitigate threats to strategic interests.

- *Defence doctrine* is the organisational culture of the military force.

Defence policy is what, traditionally, is in Australia's Defence white papers. It lays out what tasks Australia's military power will be directed towards achieving [e.g. upholding the 'international rules-based order' (Defence 2016) or defending Australia's 'northern approaches' (Defence 1987) *etc.*]. Defence policy also decides where finite resources will be directed – every procurement decision includes an opportunity cost.

Defence strategy is how military power (created by policy) will be used to achieve the strategic objectives (defined by policy). It is important to note that *defence* strategy is different from *military* strategy. It would be awkward to describe Operation Desert Storm in 1991 as a defence strategy. Defence strategy is the use of force in peacetime. Defence strategy is thus closely related to different deterrence strategies (Lockyer and Cohen 2017). It is the use of force during peacetime that makes nasty things less likely to occur and, if they do, to be less severe.

Defence doctrine is how the force intends to fight. For example, Army has been doing a lot of good work on a new 'maritime strategy' for Australia. Essentially, they want to pump saltwater in the veins of our soldiers. It is a good idea. But it is not a strategy. It is a doctrine – how we intend to fight. Defence strategy, in contrast, is how force is applied to make opponents less likely to threaten strategic interests.

## **Alternative Strategic Options for Australia**

I will now briefly sketch some of the main defence options available to Australia. If you would like a more nuanced discussion of each, I would point you towards the book (Lockyer 2017).

### **Option 1: Defence of Australia Policy**

The Defence of Australia policy argues that the Australian continent is the ultimate strategic interest and,

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thus, should also be the primary strategic objective of defence policy and strategy. There are two subsequent defence strategy options. The first has historically been advanced by Paul Dibb (1986, 2006) who has argued that Australia should deter other states from threatening Australia by making it physically impossible for them to do so: “Don’t try because you can’t do it”. Australia can use its favourable geography (air-sea gap) and technological edge to shoot-down or sink any attacking force as they try to cross Australia’s northern moat. This is essentially an ‘anti-access’ strategy and attempts to achieve sea control.

Hugh White (2012) agrees broadly with Dibb, except thinks that the bar is unnecessarily high and unachievable in a far more military-capable region. White submits that all Australia needs to achieve is ‘sea denial’, not ‘sea control’. An aggressor will be deterred from attacking if the seas are too unsafe for them to project high-value surface ships into the waters around Australia. This is an ‘area denial’ strategy: “Don’t try, it is too risky”.

Note: discussion of Chinese strategy normally groups anti-access/area-denial together, but as the Dibb-White distinction makes clear, they are different defence strategies.

#### **Option 2: Flexible Deterrent Policy**

Ross Babbage (2008) has long argued that Australia’s long coastline, small population and relatively small defence forces makes defending the Australian continent futile. An enemy will always be able to find an unprotected stretch of coastline. If you cannot rely upon the shield, you must lean more heavily upon the sword. Babbage advocates for a defence strategy based upon deterrence by punishment. Australia should equip itself with capabilities that could “rip an arm off a giant” (e.g. cyber, long-range special forces, ballistic missiles, Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines, etc.). The deterrent message is clear: “Don’t try, because our response will hurt you more than any gain you can possibly achieve”.

#### **Option 3: Status Quo Defence Policy**

The *status quo* defence policy argues that Australia is not under any immediate threat of attack. Consequently, it breaks from Options 1 and 2 by not making the defence of the Australian mainland its primary strategic objective. Instead, it argues that as long as the United States remains the sole remaining superpower and the balance of power in the region remains stable, Australia will remain secure. It is called the ‘*status quo*’ policy because it aims to maintain the international *status quo* – not because it is arguing for the *status quo* in Australian defence policy. There are two associated defence strategies.

The ‘order-oriented’ defence strategy is most closely linked to the work of Michael Evans (2005). Evans argues that challenges to the liberal international order need to be confronted. Australia’s military power should buttress United States power, by helping it confront ideological and strategic challengers – whether they be Islamic State

in Syria, Russia in the Ukraine, or China in the South China Sea.

The ‘threat-oriented’ approach, in contrast, focuses on China as the regional revisionist power and suggests that Australia should partner with other *status-quo* democratic regional powers (namely, the United States, Japan and India) to maintain the regional power balance (Brown and Medcalf 2013).

The distinction between ‘order-oriented’ and ‘threat-oriented’ *status quo* is important as they prescribe very different defence strategies. Evans’ approach would focus on fighting alongside the United States on expeditionary operations and, thus, the Australian Defence Force should focus on a ‘maritime strategy’, amphibious warfare and a large expeditionary army. The ‘threat-oriented’ approach is more concerned with sea and air power (Exercise Malabar<sup>2</sup> during peacetime and Australia’s contribution to ‘Air-Sea Battle’ in war as described further on).

#### **Option 4: Security-based Defence Policy**

Alan Dupont (2003) argues that the Australian military should be equipped and readied to perform the tasks that they actually do: counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, hybrid warfare<sup>3</sup> and confronting ‘new’ security challenges. Dupont has long asked: “who exactly is going to attack Australia?” The answer, according to Dupont, are terrorists and non-state actors, not China, India or Indonesia.

#### **How would we know a good defence strategy from a bad one?**

The reason why all these alternatives have been influential for so long is that they are all persuasive and none are easily dismissed out-of-hand. But we need some way of evaluating good and bad defence strategies. I argue that we need to draw upon the fundamental definition of strategy to test the essence of each approach. The definition of strategy has remained pretty consistent for hundreds of years, most definitions typically explain that it is the marshalling of available resources to achieve a high-end policy goal in the face of a thinking opponent who will *react*. Consequently, there is not one, but three tests for a good strategy.

1. Goal Consistency: How closely do the goals of the defence strategy pair with the defence policy objectives?
2. Foil Test: Has the defence strategy taken into consideration the likely counter-strategies of friends and opponents?

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<sup>2</sup>Exercise Malabar is an annual naval exercise involving India, Japan and the United States. The Howard Government committed Australia to participating in the 2007 Exercise Malabar and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The Rudd Government, however, withdrew Australia believing – correctly – that the exercise is part of India’s and Japan’s containment strategy of China. The Abbott Government (a keen supporter of the order-oriented *status quo* approach) was apparently very keen for Australia to re-enter the exercise and security dialogue – but was removed from power before anything came of it.

<sup>3</sup>Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare and cyberwarfare.

3. Workability Test: Can the strategy feasibly achieve the aim of the policy with the resources that have been made available?

### Evaluation of Australia's Alternative Strategic Options

When we apply these three tests to the current suite of defence options (Table 1), it emerges that Hugh White's area denial is the only 'good' defence strategy and, even then, it is because the defence policy that is associated with the strategy is incredibly generous – the defence budget is imagined to double to 4 per cent of GDP; and it would also double the number of Australia's attack submarines and air-superiority fighters.

**Table 1:** Good and bad Australian defence strategies (adopted from Lockyer 2017: 114)

Defence Policy	Defence Strategy	Goal Test	Foil Test	Workability Test	Evaluation
Defence of Australia	Anti-Access Denial	Pass	Fail	Fail	Bad
	Area-Denial	Pass	Pass	Pass	Good
Flexible deterrent	Deterrence by Punishment	Fail	Fail	Pass	Bad
Status quo – Threat oriented	Mahanian Air-Sea Battle	Pass	Neutral	Pass	Neutral
Status quo – order oriented	No strategy	-	-	-	Bad
Security based	No strategy	-	-	-	Bad

### Formulating a New Strategic Option from First Principles

So, despite the smorgasbord, we are left without a good defence strategy option. How would we build a defence strategy from first principles? Let us begin with two definitions, strategic interests and strategic objectives.

#### Strategic Interests

Strategic interests are those elements within a state's geopolitical outlook that, if threatened, would significantly increase the likelihood of a conventional military attack.

Strategic interests tend to be enduring, if not permanent, realities of a state. It never ceases to surprise me when walking the battlefields of Europe how many have been fought on the same pieces of dirt – decades or even centuries apart.

Britain's strategic interests, for instance, have remained remarkably consistent over the centuries. First, the British Isles and the seas that surround them are its foremost strategic interest. Second, are the Low Countries as they represent the best jumping off point for an attack on the British Isles. If they were to fall to a rival great power, the likelihood of a conventional military attack would significantly increase. Third is that no single great power gains control over continental Europe – to this end, Britain has fought with the Germans and the Russians against the French, with the French and the Russians against the Germans, and fought a Cold War with the French and the Germans against the Russians.

Being a maritime state, Australia's strategic interests follow a similar pattern:

1. the Australian mainland and its littoral seas;
2. the Indo-Pacific Arc;

3. the Melanesian Arc;
4. continental South-East Asia; and
5. a favourable international order upheld by an amicable superpower.

The Australian mainland will always be the ultimate strategic interest. The Indo-Pacific Arc (sometimes called Australia's northern approaches) is the maritime gateway between the Indian and Pacific oceans and captures Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The Melanesian Arc curves around from East Timor, to Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Fiji. These two arcs are to Australia what the "Low Countries" are to Britain or the Korean Peninsula is to Japan. If a great power were to establish a base, or gain access to a base, within these regions, then the threat of a conventional military attack on Australia would significantly increase. Next, no great power should gain control over continental South-East Asia. The final strategic interest is a stable global order.

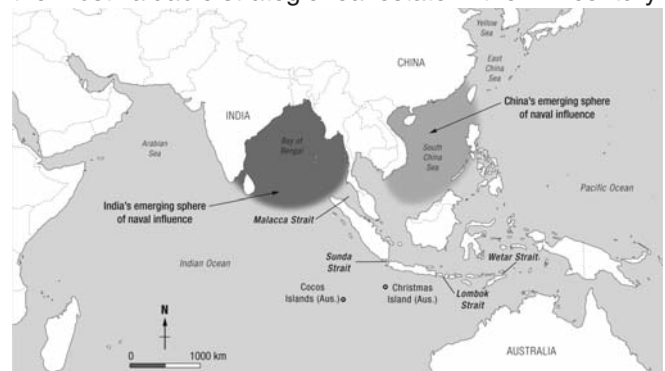
#### Strategic Objectives

To this point, we are tracking along a similar geopolitical logic used by both Paul Dibb and Hugh White. Except, both Dibb and White say that because the Australian mainland is the ultimate strategic interest it ought to also be Australia's primary strategic objective. This misunderstands how strategic *interests* are converted into strategic *objectives*.

Strategic objectives are the ultimate ends of defence policy and strategy. Defence planners decide which strategic interests should become the primary strategic objective, secondary strategic objective, tertiary strategic objective *etc.* Not all strategic interests will be converted into strategic objectives as: 1) the threats are beyond the military power of the state to mitigate; or 2) there is no credible threat to the strategic interest.

Clearly, there is no credible threat to the Australian mainland of a conventional military attack within the time horizon of the current strategic guidance.

The same, however, is not true of the Indo-Pacific Arc (Map 1). China is currently expanding its sphere of naval influence through the South China Sea. India is cementing its sphere of naval influence in the Bay of Bengal. These two emerging great power rivals look destined to compete for influence through the Indo-Pacific Arc. Indeed, the maritime gateway between the Indian and Pacific oceans is certain to become some of the most valuable strategic real estate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



**Map 1:** The Indo-Pacific Region showing the emerging spheres of naval influence of India and China [adopted from Lockyer 2017: 210]

This new reality requires Australia to reconceptualise the region. Historically, Australian defence planners have thought about the Indo-Pacific Arc along its vertical-axis. It has been believed to be the most likely route an attacking force would take to get to Australia (*à la* 1942, which is embedded in the idea of Australia's 'northern approaches'). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the Indo-Pacific Arc's value will be along its horizontal-axis. This requires a deep rethink of some of Australia's fundamental assumptions.

### **Australia's Primary Strategic Objective**

I argue that the Indo-Pacific Arc should be translated into Australia's primary strategic objective. Although great power rivalry and competition is inevitable as China and India rise to take their respective places within the new international order, Australia must attempt to decrease the risk that this argy-bargy does not happen in its front-yard. Both China and India will continue to push back against the influence of other great powers and attempt to carve out security zones for themselves – this is what emerging great powers do. But the Indo-Pacific Arc must be a buffer zone between the spheres of influence not a zone of competition.

How can Australia's defence strategy deter the great powers from competing in the Indo-Pacific Arc? This depends on how the great power intends on expanding their influence through the region. They broadly have two options: measures short of war (MSOW); or, conventional operations.

### **Deterring Measures Short of War**

MSOW is the most likely means that a great power would apply. China has used it successfully in the South China Sea and, more broadly, Iran and Russia have both recently expanded their spheres of influence through MSOW strategies. China has used fishing boats, coastguard vessels, oilrigs and energy exploration, diplomacy and political intrusion to expand its sphere of influence.

States can do things within their spheres of influence that would provoke resistance from other great powers if they did the same actions outside their spheres of influence. For instance, establishing a naval base within a great power's sphere of influence would not provoke retaliation, but the same action elsewhere in the world might. So, what China has done successfully in the South China Sea is to gradually raise the bar – fishing boats are replaced by coastguard vessels which, in turn, are replaced by warships. Each escalation is never enough to provoke a conventional military response by the United States and the other great powers and, progressively, the area is incorporated into its sphere of influence.

To deter MSOW, Australia should look to partner with the other Indo-Pacific nations (the IP4<sup>4</sup>) to increase the difficulty of MSOW approaches through the region (see Lockyer 2015). Above all else, there needs to be

enhanced air and sea surveillance through the Indo-Pacific gateway. Security co-operation between the IP4 will need to be gradual. In the past, the regional powers have frequently viewed each other as sources of threat, not co-operation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, there is a clear convergence of interests between the IP4 on both security and strategic matters, and trust and co-operation continue to improve. Over time, the Indo-Pacific gateway should be developed into a gauntlet where all air and sea vessels are tracked as they make their journey through the region and the regional powers possess the capabilities to determine whether the traverser should be intercepted or granted free passage.

### **Deterring Conventional Military Means**

A less likely approach would be for a great power to extend its sphere of influence through conventional military means. This might be opportunistic (*e.g.* the other great powers are preoccupied), a surprise attack or a pre-emptive attack. Either way, Australia's defence strategy should be aimed at increasing the costs to any great power that made a grab for enhanced regional influence through conventional means. To deter this contingency, Australia should employ a Corbettian maritime defence strategy.<sup>5</sup>

There has been a debate in Washington, DC, on how to fight a future war against China. By far the most popular and developed strategy is 'Air-Sea Battle'. This strategy is influenced by the thinking of Alfred Mahan<sup>6</sup>. It involves engaging the Chinese fleet, comprehensively defeating it, and pushing through to attack the Chinese anti-access/area denial assets. Thus, the United States navy and air force would reclaim control through the first and second island chains<sup>7</sup>.

A second option, however, is a 'distant blockage'. This option is in the tradition of Julian Corbett and argues that the United States does not need to fight the Chinese front-on. Eighty per cent of Chinese energy traverses through the Malacca Strait (only about a kilometre wide at its narrowest point). The United States Navy could strangle China from afar. Beijing calls this its 'Malacca Dilemma'.

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<sup>5</sup>Sir Julian Corbett was a late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century British naval historian and geostrategist. What mattered to Corbett was not Mahan's concept of physical destruction of the enemy (a decisive battle), but the act of passage on the sea. Corbett defined two fundamental methods of obtaining control of the maritime lines of communication: the physical destruction or capture of enemy warships and merchantmen; and/or a naval blockade. Today, this concept is defined as sea control (Corbett 1988).

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Thayer Mahan was a 19<sup>th</sup> century United States naval officer, historian and geostrategist. His key themes included: the value of central position, enabling rapid re-deployment of forces from one ocean to another; the criticality of choke points, such as straits; the need to control maritime lines of communication; the blockade; and the decisive battle (Mahan 1890, 1892).

<sup>7</sup>The First Island Chain refers to the first chain of major archipelagos out from the East Asian mainland and encompasses the Okhotsk, Japan, Yellow, East China and South China Seas. The Second Island Chain runs from Japan through Guam to western New Guinea and encompasses the Philippines Sea.

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<sup>4</sup>Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore

A Corbettian strategy has not been popular in Washington, DC, in part because it is likely to provoke the precise behaviour it is trying to deter. When Beijing sees that Washington is planning to strangle it through the Indo-Pacific Arc, it is likely to urgently move to ensure that it can keep its merchant fleet safe through the straits. This means incorporating the region into its expanding sphere of influence. In short, if Washington adopted a Corbettian strategy it may provoke the exact reaction it is trying to deter.

Australia, however, is not the United States. Beijing would not fear that Australia would unilaterally and preemptively attempt to disrupt Chinese maritime trade or attack and dismantle its 'string of pearls'<sup>8</sup> through the Indian Ocean. Despite Australia being unlikely to strike first, there should be little doubt in Beijing, or New Delhi, or Tokyo, or elsewhere, that if they were to make an aggressive play for influence through the Indo-Pacific Arc, Canberra would make sure that their respective 'Malacca Dilemmas' became a reality.

A Corbettian maritime strategy plays to Australia's strengths. The Army has been looking to improve its ability to perform amphibious operations (as mentioned earlier, they call this a maritime strategy, but it is in fact a maritime doctrine). A Corbettian maritime strategy would give direction to these endeavours.

## Conclusion

The main strategic thinkers in Australia have all been engaged in robust debates for decades without seemingly being able to land a punch on each other. So, the debate goes around-and-around in circles without advancing. The reason, I argue, is that they are often using the same nomenclature to mean different things (e.g. defence strategy) or using terms as synonymous. This imprecise language has often led to sloppy thinking. To advance the debate, in a constructive way, some broad agreement on what is being debated is required. I made an initial suggestion on how to define the key terms in the debate. Second, we need to have some agreement on what a 'good' and 'bad' defence strategy would be for Australia. I used the logic of strategy to develop an evaluation tool. Finally, I attempted to build a new defence strategy for Australia from first principles.

None of the above is meant to be definitive. My hope is that by suggesting some definitions and a framework and demonstrating how these could be mobilised to create a new defence strategy, the debate in Australia can advance. I hope that defence scholars can begin to land punches on each other in order to advance the debate – even if my work is the boxing bag.

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<sup>8</sup>The 'String of Pearls' refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities along its sea lines of communication from China to Port Sudan.