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The Next White Paper

By Alan Stephens

It is now more than two years since the current defence white paper was released. Titled *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century*, that paper seemed to indicate a shift away from supporting US-led expeditionary wars of choice (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), towards a more independent strategy of shaping and controlling events in our own region. In the event, however, the Australian Defence Force has remained bogged down in the disastrous invasion of Afghanistan.

According to the then-minister for defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, the 2009 white paper took 14 months to prepare. If work started now, a similar timeframe would see a new paper launched at the end of 2012, coinciding with the next American presidential election. Given that the US is likely to get out of Afghanistan sooner rather than later, especially if President Obama is re-elected, and given the chastening experience of our most recent military misadventures, Defence Minister Stephen Smith would be well-advised to instruct his department to revisit Australia's strategic outlook, and to develop a new defence white paper as a matter of priority.

Four factors are of superseding planning importance: our alliance with the US; the continuing rise of China; the persistent failure of our expeditionary operations; and the force structure needed to translate strategy into military power.

The matter of the Australia/US security relationship was addressed by the Williams Foundation in July's *Australian Aviation*. In brief, the alliance remains fundamental to Australia's well-being. At the same time, it is difficult to see how our unquestioning support for the US's series of failed wars of choice has served anyone's interests, including America's. It is also the case that our token military contributions have not made the slightest difference to the outcome of any of those conflicts.

Consistent with the notion of the 'Asia-Pacific Century', it would be immeasurably more constructive – for both Australia and America - if we were to focus our attention and resources on helping our own region to become stable and prosperous, noting that in many respects we are much better placed than the US to do so. An ADF informed by the right strategy and structured accordingly would be a centrepiece of that approach.

China is the key here. Thus far the West has not dealt at all well with China's irresistible rise. A major concern has been the US's misplaced fixation on the so-called 'war on terror'. More recently, the problems caused by that strategic myopia have been compounded by a political system that has stalled, and an economy plagued by serious structural defects. Indeed, in April, the IMF predicted that China could become the world's richest nation as soon as 2016.

While the US has been pursuing the wrong strategy in the wrong place, China has become a strategic competitor in the broadest sense of the term, in a way that Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and their ilk never could.

How best to accommodate China's legitimate ambitions as a superpower, while simultaneously securing our interests and those of our friends, is the West's great strategic challenge of this era.

Military forces that shape and deter are one of the essential components of the mechanisms governments can use to achieve the 'balance of power' that historically has helped establish a manageable international order. Two authoritative sources have recently pointed to serious flaws in the West's current approach to force structuring.

Commenting on last year's Strategic Defence and Security Review in the UK, *The Economist* noted that NATO's on-going air campaign in Libya quickly exposed as short-sighted plans to reduce vital balance of power air and sea capabilities, simply in the interests of cost-cutting.

A similar conclusion has been reached by Australia's leading defence analyst, Professor Hugh White, who has observed that the 'cult of counterinsurgency', which has corrupted strategic thinking and force structures in the West, has finally been recognised as bankrupt. As White wrote, 'Sending soldiers to transmute complex and alien societies into new shapes to suit our interests is futile and in the end humiliating'. In the meantime, however, in some Western services, land force numbers have risen to some 65% of total personnel, a percentage dangerously out of balance with the main strategic game.

Thanks to the far-sightedness of small sections of the Australian Defence organisation, and despite having to operate within a mendacious doctrinal environment for many years, the ADF is on the brink of assembling a force structure capable of making a significant contribution to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, in the coming decade, the ADF should achieve an exceptional ability to conduct the four fundamental campaigns of Comprehension (centred on intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance); Control (of air and sea approaches); Coercion; and Stabilisation/Intervention.

What is needed now is a new, independent-minded, national defence policy that unequivocally commits the ADF to the pursuit of stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.