



Australian Defence White Paper 2013 - An Assessment

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Steadfastly adhering to five year interval between two defence white papers, Australia released its new Defence White Paper (DWP) in May 2013. According to the DWP, the country's defence policy is primarily anchored on its national security, a secure periphery encompassing South Pacific and Timor-Leste, promoting stability in Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.

The DWP highlights the strategic priorities for Australia in the wake of the rise of China and to a lesser extent India, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia. Methodically subscribing to the concept of 'Indo-Pacific', the DWP refers to it as a 'system' and an 'overarching regional construct'. Outlining the need for comprehensive security architecture for Indo-Pacific, it subscribes to the ASEAN centric initiatives such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers plus (ADMM+) Meeting and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Placing Southeast Asia as the centre of the Indo-Pacific security arc, it advocates the need for security convergence of the two Oceans (Indian and Pacific), catering to large volume of maritime trade and commerce. While prioritising its alliance relationship with US, it has welcomed the US rebalancing in Asia and reinforced that for Australia, US would remain the preeminent power in Asia-Pacific. However, on US-China relations, it strongly campaigns for cooperative and conciliatory stance towards China.

Prior to the DWP-2013, Australia had released *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (October 2012) followed by the *National Security Strategy* (January 2013). In these policy documents, Australia articulated its ‘Asianist’ orientation in terms of trade and commerce, strategic thinking and regional security cooperation. While taking a constructive view about promoting regional security and ‘order’ in Asia, DWP-2013 addresses the rise of China as an opportunity, and justifies China’s military modernisation as a natural corollary to its high economic growth. Further, it states that Australia ‘*does not approach China as an adversary*’. This is in contrast to the DWP-2009 which projected China as a major determinant of Asian security order. DWP-2013 highlights the increasing tension in East China Sea and South China Sea, but carefully omits any reference to China’s assertive posture. The White Paper prescribes dialogue among the contesting parties including China, for maintaining regional peace and security. This clearly highlights Australia’s policy of constructive engagement with the major players in the region.

As part of its international obligations, the DWP-2013 refers to the withdrawal plans of Australian Defence Forces (ADF) from Afghanistan, Timor Leste and Solomon islands. It reiterates its commitment towards UN peacekeeping efforts, climate change, resource security, international non-proliferation regime and Antarctica, very much in consonance with its policy stance.

Australia envisages huge geographic swathe from Timor Leste to the South Pacific island nations as its prime security responsibility. DWP states that Australia’s fundamental strategic interests include defending the country against any hostile powers, and maintaining the security, stability and unity in its periphery.

With regard to India, the DWP-2013 lauds the economic development of the country and highlights the military modernisation efforts of India’s defence forces. It further states that India has become a major player in Indian Ocean region. Realistically assessing the India-Pakistan ties, it highlights that because of terrorist incidents like Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008, the ‘*large scale conflict between the two nations cannot be ruled out*’. Reflecting the country’s increasingly strong stance against terrorism and nuclear non proliferation, it very aptly advocates the need of ‘maintaining peace’ between India and Pakistan.

Throughout the DWP-2013, there is increasing reference to rules based order and promotion of cooperation. It further highlights, *“Australia supports a rules-based regional security order that fosters cooperation, eases tensions between states and provides incentives to major powers like China and India to rise peacefully.”* This projects Australia’s orientation towards promotion of cooperation which will seek to diffuse any crisis, promote dialogue and facilitate trade, commerce and investment among rising powers.

The DWP also refers to the increasing military modernisation of Southeast Asian nations like Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Justifying the modernisation, the DWP states that it provides Australia an opportunity to partner with nations having more advanced weaponry and military. However, with a word of caution, it states that Australia needs to update its military inventory to maintain a relative edge over other nations. In that context, Australia advocates effective planning and smart purchases due to declining defence budget. Earlier, DWP-2009 envisaged enhancing sub surface and surface capabilities of ADF, building air superiority as well as enhancing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and building cyber security architecture. While reiterating those issues, DWP-2013 stresses more on cyber security and concedes that in terms of intelligence and surveillance missions, US assistance would be required in the long run.

While mentioning US alliance relationship and strategic partnerships in Asia, it eulogises US as the prime guarantor of extended deterrence leading to stable and secure regional environment. Alluding to the enhanced military cooperation between US and Australia, it does give an indication about the US troops stationed in Darwin and Australia’s Indian Ocean base HMAS Sterling (Garden Island) but it cautiously underplays the extent of future cooperation between the two allies.

Overall, DWP-2013 showcases the changed strategic orientation of Australia. Steering clear of being seen as the US deputy sheriff in Indo-Pacific, Australia has deftly tried to please China. Projecting India as an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific region clearly shows Australia’s positive outlook towards India.

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