

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2449  
May 15, 2009

## Australia Surveys Asia's Future

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On May 2, Australia released its first defense white paper in almost a decade. “Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030” proposes a wide-ranging strategic agenda that is the product of geography, the lessons of Australia’s history, and the island nation’s analysis of shifting power dynamics in the “wider Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>1</sup>

What is striking is that Australia appears to be hedging not so much against the rise of China but against the decline of American predominance in the region. The U.S. should welcome Australia’s desire to play a more prominent role in the Asia-Pacific. An Australian Defense Force (ADF) that can generate substantial air and maritime presence in the Asia-Pacific, while also contributing to international stability operations, will ensure that Australia continues to be one of America’s most capable allies and a valued contributor to regional peace and stability.

At the same time, however, the U.S. should take the studied calculations of one of its most loyal and trustworthy allies as an opportunity to reassure friends and competitors alike that the U.S. is in the Asia-Pacific for the long haul. America can send this message with its words, attention to the diplomatic life of the region, and assistance, investment, and trade. But the most important signal the U.S. can send about its long-term intentions will be derived from how it spends its own defense dollars. The foundation of America’s commitment can be maintained only with a robust military presence.

The U.S. Seventh Fleet and America’s current network of allies, bases, and access in Asia are at the

heart of this effort. But sustaining this presence requires long-term investment in a Navy that can project power throughout the region’s vast oceans, a modernized Air Force that can ensure air dominance against all potential adversaries, and theater ballistic missile defense systems to provide protection for forward-deployed military assets. Investment decisions today that ensure American predominance far into the future say far more about its commitment to Asia than all other soft power tools combined.

**Wither American Predominance?** While its white paper is very much focused on China, the country most responsible for driving Australia’s defense planning is the U.S. *Force 2030* bluntly asks: “Will the United States continue to play over the very long term the strategic role that it has undertaken since the end of World War II?” Indeed, the open question regarding the future of America’s role in Asia is the central variable driving almost all of the documents assumptions and recommendations.

For Australia, according to the report, “strategic stability in the region is best underpinned by the continued presence of the United States.” The decline of American predominance would not just impact Australia’s security posture but also the

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2449.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2449.cfm)

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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American-led order that has maintained a stable, prosperous, and increasingly liberal Asia-Pacific since the end of the Second World War. The paper predicts confidently that U.S. primacy will continue for at least the next 20 years. But it also warns that “as other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change.”

Chief among Australia’s near-term concerns is that America may find its attention increasingly occupied by challenges in other regions of the world. Since 9/11, Asia has witnessed how America’s focus can be easily pulled and constrained by emerging events. It is therefore reasonable for the paper to assume that the U.S. will be more active in seeking assistance from regional allies during crises and for the day-to-day maintenance of a stable security environment.

**China as a “Leading Stakeholder.”** *Force 2030*’s concern about the rise of China underpins much of the document’s force structure projections. The strategy represents a changing perception regarding the military power of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) by Australian defense officials. Not only does it predict a “significant opportunity” for China to become a “leading stakeholder” of international scale; it also projects the PLA will be the strongest military in Asia “by a considerable margin.”

Similar to American defense officials, Australia remains concerned with the level of transparency surrounding the PLA’s modernization efforts. Even while funding double-digit increases in their defense budget for the past two decades, Beijing continues to insist its military is purely a “defensive” force. *Force 2030* questions this by asserting that the Chinese military build up “appears potentially to be beyond the scope of what would be required for a conflict over Taiwan.” This finding mirrors Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen’s statement that he believes China’s efforts were “very much focused” on the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

One area to which the white paper devoted considerable attention is anti-submarine warfare (ASW). As a critical component of China’s asymmetric strategy to deny the U.S. access to the western Pacific Ocean, nuclear and diesel attack submarines, along with nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), are at the forefront of Beijing’s modernization efforts. Beijing’s submarine procurement strategy complements its development of a more robust maritime force that includes advanced destroyers, frigates, and its long-term drive for an aircraft carrier fleet.

Primarily as a result of these trends, *Force 2030* determines: “The major new direction that has emerged through consideration of current and future requirements is a significant focus on enhancing our maritime capabilities.” As part of its effort to place a greater emphasis on the ASW mission, Australia plans to purchase 12 next-generation submarines (doubling the size of its current fleet), eight new Future Frigates, 24 naval combat helicopters, and eight new maritime patrol aircraft, along with three new anti-air warfare destroyers (AAW) to improve the fleet’s air defense capabilities. The end goal, as *Force 2030* postulates, will be “a more potent and heavier maritime force.”

**Missile Defense.** Australia continues to disagree with the U.S. over missile defense policy. The Australian government is “opposed to the development of a unilateral national missile defense system by any nation because such a system would be at odds with the maintenance of global nuclear deterrence.” However, an exercise conducted in 2008 by Heritage Foundation analyst Baker Spring suggests the opposite: that missile defenses actually *reduce* the propensity of states to use offensive weapons, thereby creating greater regional stability.<sup>3</sup>

While Australia may disagree with the U.S. on the concept of a national missile defense system, *Force 2030* does briefly suggest the significance of

1. Australian Government: Department of Defense, “Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030,” May 2009, at [http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence\\_white\\_paper\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf) (May 12, 2009).
2. Reuters, “China Military Buildup Seems U.S.-focused: Mullen,” May 4, 2009, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/usPoliticsNews/idUKTRE54363X20090504> (May 13, 2009).
3. Baker Spring, “Nuclear Games: A Tool for Examining Nuclear Stability in a Proliferated Setting,” Heritage Foundation Lecture No. 1066, March 11, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1066.cfm>.

theater missile defense systems for protection of forward-deployed ADF assets in an anti-access/area-denial environment.

**A Promising Path.** As Australia acknowledges, the U.S. military has helped to assure its security for the past half-century. Unlike Europe, where America's security blanket has created the faulty assumption in the minds of many European policymakers that the world has entered a post-sovereign era of peace and cooperation, Australia's geography puts it at the center of Asia-Pacific geopolitics. This appears to have engendered a sense of strategic clarity in Australia.

Even as U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates proposes reforming and rebalancing the American military for a future of "hybrid" military engagements and irregular warfare missions while accepting greater risk in the conventional deterrence mission, Australia has boldly concluded that "it would be premature to judge that war among states, including the major powers, has been eliminated as a feature of the international system."

Not only has Australia chosen to reaffirm the importance of air and sea power and the role these capabilities play in conventional deterrence, but *Force 2030* also confirms that so long as nuclear weapons exist, Australia will remain reliant upon the U.S. nuclear arsenal to deter aggression and ensure its security. Australia's strong commitment to, and reliance on, America's nuclear arsenal should serve as a subtle warning of the consequences if the U.S. nuclear arsenal is allowed to further atrophy. The findings of the recently released report of the Congressional Commission on the

Strategic Posture of the United States are not reassuring.<sup>4</sup> Questioning the future credibility of America's nuclear deterrent, the report raises concerns that both the physical nuclear infrastructure and the intellectual infrastructure are in serious trouble.

**America's Decision.** Washington should welcome and encourage the strategic findings and force structure proposals embedded in Australia's new defense white paper. An ADF that can play a more significant role in providing forward deployed maritime presence in the Pacific and Indian oceans would help manage the vast distances the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) is tasked with covering.

Ultimately, the real significance of *Force 2030* for the United States rests with the assumptions Australia has made concerning its current and future security. Australia finds itself at an important juncture, where uncertainty regarding the future of American predominance in the region has led it to conclude that while it may continue to hope for the best and remain committed to the U.S, the country must also begin to plan for the worst—the potential decline of U.S. influence. While China will continue to invest in its military, the decisions surrounding a stable balance of power and the continuation of a free and prosperous Asia remain with Washington. The clarity Australia has provided with *Force 2030* should serve as both a warning and a guidepost for America's future commitments to the region.

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4. "America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States," United States Institute of Peace, May 2009, at [http://media.usip.org/reports/strat\\_posture\\_report.pdf](http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf) (May 13, 2009).