



WHAT WAS THE 'DEFENCE OF AUSTRALIA' STRATEGIC POLICY? HOW DID THE POLICY EVOLVE OVER TIME? AND IS IT RELEVANT TODAY AND INTO THE FUTURE?

Reid Hutchins

SYNOPSIS

The Defence of Australia (DOA) strategy came to the fore of Australian defence planning in the 1987 White Paper. At its core, DOA is a self-reliant policy that played a role in Australian defence planning since the Vietnam War. Although still relevant today, DOA thinking has expanded, whilst defence planners have begun to use the term 'Defence of Australia Plus' (DOA+) to define a new era in Australian defence planning. DOA is a strategy based on the ADF's capacity to defend Australian interests, rather than a foreign expeditionary-orientated defence force. Over time, this strategy has evolved, however self-reliance still remains a fundamental aspect of Australian defence policy. I will firstly outline four key principles of DOA, followed by a discussion on whether the concept of self-reliance has featured within DOA+ thinking.

In 1985, former Defence Minister Kim Beazley commissioned an official inquiry into the military capabilities of the Australian armed forces, in what amounted to the Dobb report. The Dobb report outlined four core principles of Australian defence planning. The first and perhaps most important principle is self-reliance. The 2013 Defence White Paper reinforced the importance of self-reliance as a founding principle of Australian defence policy. The Vietnam War ushered in a new era of Australian defence policy where the ADF took a defensive posture in protecting Australian territory without the 'combat assistance' of allies. On this point, Australia is not renouncing its main security alliances with

such allies as the United States and New Zealand. Rather, self-reliance is used to denote Australia's capacity to militarily defend itself without the help of the militaries of other nations.

Limiting military operations to within Australia's own geographical region is the [second principle](#) of DOA. This focus of limiting military operations to within the South-West Pacific and Asia-Pacific region is clearly outlined in the 2013 Defence White Paper. Sections [3.30 to 3.34](#) are dedicated specifically to the task of ADF combat preparedness in defence of Australian territory, and 'contributing to the security of our immediate neighbourhood and the wider region'. Whilst the Dobb Report does not foresee a large scale assault on the Australian mainland, Dobb does suggest that low-level conflict could still pose a threat. Some [commentators](#) view Dobb as promoting a 'Fortress Australia' theory of Australian defence policy that challenges the previous strategy of 'forward defence'. Forward defence was a prevailing defence policy since Federation that involved Australian military incursions in the Dardanelles, Burma, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The third principle of DOA concerns Australia's military capacity and influence, which is a recurring feature of the 1987 White Paper. This military capacity is stated as being defensive, and must:

Prevent an enemy from attacking us successfully in our sea and air approaches, gaining a foothold on our territory, or extracting political concessions from us through the use of military force.

The military capabilities of Australian land, air and sea forces should therefore be adequately resourced by the Australian government. Whilst the 1987 White Paper gives 'priority to our own national security tasks', Australia's regional strategic challenges must be met with sufficient military capabilities. Recent [commentators](#) contend that during the time in which the Dobb Report was released, Indonesia was considered a 'potential adversary', which defence planners took into account. This consideration may also have been based on declassified *Strategic Basis* defence papers, which throughout the Cold War had regarded a communist-friendly Indonesia a [strategic threat](#).

On Australia's influence, the [1987 White Paper](#) clearly states- 'there are limits to our defence capacity and influence [...] Australia's ability to influence the state of world security is limited'. Australia's small population and geographical isolation; mean that there are significant constraints to Australia's capacity to influence important world affairs. Conflicts, security tensions and multinational security dialogues in Europe and the Middle East have not required a significantly large Australian diplomatic or defence presence. In this regard, there appears to be an implicit acknowledgement of Australia's role as a middle power. Australia's capacity or influence as a middle power was also acknowledged in 2013. Rather than shaping the security framework in important world affairs, or leading defence

forces into a conflict, Australia is only [capable](#) of ‘contributing to international security efforts’ in coalition with a stronger security partner.

The fourth and final principle of DOA is the possible contingencies that could impact Australia’s defence planning. A largest section of the 1987 White Paper is dedicated to predicting possible events and scenarios that the ADF may be required to address in order to protect Australian interests. By understanding all possible threats and attacks to Australia, the posture or structure of Australian forces would be able to adjust accordingly. The most likely form of military pressure is seen to be a low-level conflict via air or sea against Northern Australia, or offshore settlements.

Declassified *Strategic Basis* papers have shown that a potential adversary could militarily harass Australian resources and territory with air and sea forces. By targeting Australia’s offshore resources or infrastructure, the adversary would be inflicting harm on Australia’s economy, therefore constituting a direct attack on Australia. An attack of this nature is not limited to overt military targeting, but covert as well. Military, industrial or cyber intelligence attacks by an adversary are incorporated into this vision of sustained low-level conflict. [Overt and covert attacks](#) could be undertaken indefinitely, to ‘demonstrate Australia’s vulnerability and thereby force political concessions over some disputed issue’. In addition, an attack is also considered to be any military, political or economic pressure against Australia with the objective of limiting Australian policy options. The White Paper neither states a specific country—nor any description of the type of country that might engage Australia in low-level conflict. The only indication as to the type of country that is capable of attacking Australia is [stated](#) to ‘already exist in the region of primary strategic interest to Australia’. It may therefore be fair to say that countries with the capacity to sustain low-level conflict against Australia that are also situated within the region include Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and China.

Retaliation is also a contingency that is calculated into DOA thinking. The ADF is required to address a low-level conflict. This includes sea, air and land operations such as land/sea mine placements, anti-air defence systems and tactical ground force capabilities that can counter any foreseeable invasion or low-level incursion. Monitoring the adversary would also be done by collecting military intelligence that would impact Australia’s defence force structure. The force structure itself would incorporate joint land, air and sea operations under the common purpose of defending Australia’s vital interests. The great geographical landmass of Australia must be defended by this joint force.

According to DOA thinking on the likelihood for a more intensive conflict in [1987](#), ‘no regional country now has the capacity—nor the motivation—to sustain high level intensive military operations against Australia’. The likelihood of a full-scale military invasion of Australia is low, not merely due to

a lack of military capacity from countries in the region. Australia's geography is exceptionally difficult to overcome for any invading force—its vast, inhospitable terrain and climate would stretch supply lines and render the adversary vulnerable to an Australian counter-offensive. The amphibious landing technology required to undertake an assault would have to be advanced and operationally sophisticated. China is the only country that might reasonably possess such [amphibious landing capabilities](#), as great efforts have been made by Beijing to modernise its navy in recent years.

DOA thinking has revolved around four general concepts. Central to these concepts is self-reliance which still has contemporary significance. Self-reliance remains a staple feature of Australian defence planning. Although commentators such as [Peter Jennings](#) have proclaimed a new era in Australian defence planning (DOA+), self-reliance remains central to Australia's defence planning.

Self-reliance came to prominence in 1987 but was consistently reaffirmed in the [1994](#) and [2000](#) White Papers. A problem that has arisen in the strategic literature regarding self-reliance, is the implication it has for Australia's alliances. [Commentators](#) have argued, that whilst DOA emphasises the importance of protecting Australia's own interests without the assistance of foreign militaries, 'Australia's commitment to self-reliance in all aspects of defence strategy has never been absolute'. This is an important observation, and one that DOA advocates such as Peter Jennings may well support. The 1987 White Paper does not reject Australia's security alliances. However, section 1.14 on Australia's alliance commitments, clearly states that the US expects Australia to defend itself. This had also been made clear by US governments from the 1960's. The Nixon Doctrine in particular cast doubt on the willingness of the US to honour the ANZUS treaty if it were ever invoked. At most, the US would provide 'logistic support' and 'necessary arms' but gave [no guarantee](#) that any US soldier would fight to protect Australia.

Australia has come to rely on American deterrence. This has not been backed-up by any formal governmental policy, but is rather an implicit understanding that the US, as a global and regional superpower, would protect Australia if called upon. Australia sits within the US sphere of influence. Whilst it is arguable how significant Australia is to the US pivot to Asia, Australia nonetheless figures within US strategy. To some extent this secures US protection but the real question remains as to whether the US would enter a military conflict to assist Australia. What appears most likely, is that Australia's most contemporary defence policy [revolves around](#) 'a mixture of self-reliance and alliance dependency' as this 'provides Australia with a range of unique opportunities'.

This is the direction that DOA has taken in the last 10 years and will continue to take in the future. DOA+ is a mixture of both old and new strategic concepts that must address challenges to peace and stability. Extended deterrence is an example of an old, yet relevant strategic concept that has been

discussed in the 2016 White Paper as an additional assurance of US protection. Extended deterrence however is not mutually beneficial because it favours the recipient. Very little effort is required of Australia in this scenario as it receives protection from a much larger security ally (US) that could put itself at risk for reprisals. In extending its support for Australia, the US may well suffer in its relationship with other states in the region. China is the most obvious state that may take issue with US extended deterrence. This has already been proven to be true in the extended deterrence given to Taiwan by the US, which has proven to be extremely problematic for Sino-American relations in the past. Other US allies in Asia have expected a similar extended deterrence relationship as states in the region grow anxious about the rise of China. In the case of South Korea and Japan, extended deterrence has been the bedrock of their alliances with the US against North Korea.

The [contention](#) has been made that 'Australia has essentially no practical experience with extended deterrence'. Meaning, Australia has not been a nation capable of providing the same extended deterrence promises that the US has within the Asia-Pacific region. Rather, the threat of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War gave enough impetus for the US to provide extended deterrence for Australia, and its allies in the region. Today, there is less of a guarantee from the US that it would militarily assist Australia, and such assistance is carefully conditioned and discussed in reactive terms. The 2013 White Paper claims that there is a 'guarantee of extended deterrence' from the US, but there appears to be a greater commitment to self-reliance. This might suggest that Australian defence planners have not fully accepted the idea of extended deterrence—or are perhaps not convinced of the American guarantee. Section 3.36 states that 'Australia's defence policy is founded on the principle of self-reliance'. This suggests the continued relevance of DOA thinking within defence policy. Self-reliance—as a key concept in DOA thinking—might however, be less relevant in the future as Australia seeks greater engagement with the Asia Pacific region.

Commentators of the [2016 White Paper](#) seem divided on this point. [Hugh White](#) holds the opinion that self-reliance has been 'substantially downgraded, if not completely abandoned'. Whilst [John Blaxland](#) concedes that whilst self-reliance has not featured heavily, 'the essence of the concept remains as strong if not stronger'. Indeed, a word search of 'self-reliance' only yields two results throughout the document. With RAAF and RAN acquiring the [big ticket items](#) in the form of submarines, frigates and aircrafts, Kim Beazley rightly proclaims a 'return to a self-reliant industry policy is at the heart of this.' This great enhancement of ADF force structure is designed specifically to secure maritime Southeast Asia. The increasing hostility of these waters has undoubtedly been at the forefront of defence planner's minds, with Australia signing off on twelve [regionally superior submarines](#). The downplay of self-reliance, as an old yet relevant staple of Australian strategic policy, is a sign that Australia's confidence in the US alliance is waning. Instead, there has been a turn towards regional security ties between ASEAN member states. This is a self-reliant posture that

reflects new realities in our maritime space—the US is waning and China is rising. Australian security needs are more in common with ASEAN member states than with the US by virtue of sheer proximity. The substantial upgrading of ADF capabilities also shows signs of weakening confidence in US extended deterrence guarantees, as we look to modernise our own deterrence capabilities. Despite the overwhelming military might of China, Australia has just entered the treacherous geopolitical maritime sphere as small players in a dangerous game. As Australia beats its chest with newly acquired [forward funded defence](#) capabilities to hearty applause from our dishevelled American uncle, it remains to be seen whether the noise will be heard from China at all. The threat of course, is whether the noise will seem threatening enough to illicit a reaction from China. What this reaction would be, and whether or not the US will step in, is the ultimate test of Australian defence policy.

Self-reliance is a key concept of DOA thinking that remains part of Australian strategic policy today. Australian strategic policy appears to be entering an emerging policy era known as DOA+. DOA+ is a mixture of old and new concepts. The old strategic concept of self-reliance, with its continued relevance in the 2013 and 2016 White Papers, is still being challenged by Australia's faith in US extended deterrence. DOA has proven to be a resilient strategy for a middle power such as Australia. In a region where there is growing anxiety about a rising China, and where territorial disputes between states threaten peace and stability, Australian strategic policy has been successful. What remains to be seen is whether Australia can continue implementing successful defence policy as the region changes with a rising China. As Australia clings to its old US alliance whilst trying to find a place in the Asian century, a flexible and accommodating defence strategy is likely to be needed in the future.