

Australia's evolving 'smart power' strategy

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Australia's newly published *Defense White Paper* (DWP) typifies the axiom that national security and defense strategies are not permanent or fixed principles. Rather, they are evolving and require periodic adjustments to changing realities in the global and regional security environment, changing threat perceptions, as well as internal socioeconomic developments that condition the pace and character of the military modernization of armed forces.

The DWP projects notable transitions in Australia's baseline geopolitical assumptions, strategic outlook, defense requirements, force posture and resource allocation. In particular, the 2013 DWP retracts from the ambitious contours of the 2009 DWP, which envisioned Australia's long-term air and naval capabilities exerting presence and influence in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Facing economic challenges coupled with steep defense budget cuts, Australia's 2009 DWP concept of "Force 2030" — with procurement plans over the next 20 years worth more than A\$70 billion — has

proved politically unaffordable and operationally unrealistic.

In 2012, Australia reduced its defense expenditures by 10.6 percent, bringing it to A\$24.18 billion or 1.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) — the lowest level since the Korean War. Furthermore, Australia's procurement spending has dropped from around 17 percent of the total budget in 2011 to just 13 percent in 2012, which amplified heated political debates about the future trajectory of the Australian Defense Forces (ADF).

Whereas the 2009 DWP declared that the pace and scope of China's force modernization has the potential to give its neighbors cause for concern, suggesting Beijing's lack of military transparency, the 2013 DWP notes that "Australia does not approach China as an adversary".

In other words, Canberra places greater emphasis on its soft power, trying to enhance its regional defense diplomacy defined by a common interest in avoiding conflict: "Australia welcomes China's rise ... as a global power, the increasing economic and strategic weight of East Asia."

This is not to say that Canberra is pulling back from its alliance with the United States. On the contrary, the 2013 DWP describes the alliance

with the US as Australia's "most important relationship". In this context, Australia is aware of its growing geostrategic importance, particularly in backing the US strategic rebalancing policy toward Asia.

Indeed, Australia's Northern Territory provides a staging area for ground, aerial and naval operations for the US Marines. Furthermore, in 2014, Western Australia will also host a US ground-based space radar station and possibly new advanced satellite-watching telescope, which are a part of the US Space Surveillance Network designed for enhanced tracking of both civilian and military satellite launches in the region — including Chinese polar-orbiting reconnaissance satellites.

Notwithstanding Australia's global commitments and security partnerships, the main focus of the revamped 2013 DWP is the strategic importance, security and prosperity of the "Indo-Pacific arc" — Australia's immediate neighborhood shaped by the ascent of China, India and Indonesia.

Inherently, the 2013 DWP accentuates Australia's embrace of "smart power" — a strategy that combines select elements of "hard power" (military capabilities) with "soft power" of attraction (defense diplomacy) de-

signed to ensure Australia's national security, while shaping strategic choices and foreign policy behavior of Australia's allies and regional neighbors — both the US and China.

However, this seemingly mutually constitutive hard-soft power relation has its limitations. Australia may not want to choose sides between the US and China, but the prevalent security challenges in East Asia may force Australia toward sharper diplomatic and military responses.

With the upcoming Australian elections, the new government is likely to rewrite the DWP. Notwithstanding its outcome, ADF's defense planning should focus on credible threats and devising strategy that builds on existing core competencies and lessons learned.

Alternatively, Australia's "strategic adaptability" may create operational uncertainties, particularly in terms of meeting future allied interoperability, contribution and involvement in potential regional crises.

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