

# Strategic Analysis Paper

7 June 2013

## Australia's Defence White Paper: A View from India

**Balaji Chandramohan**  
*FDI Visiting Fellow*

### Key Points

- The Australian Defence White Paper 2013 assumes a new importance from India's point of view with the increasing significance of the geo-political term, "Indo-Pacific".
- India's shift of strategic priority from South-East Asia to the South-West Pacific – as per the "Look East" policy – is welcomed in the White Paper.
- India recognises that it will need to re-organise its Command and Staff systems with a view to Joint Operations in the Indo-Pacific in the years ahead, with countries such as Australia.
- Both India and Australia are wary of China's increased maritime capabilities in the Indo-Pacific; both countries will co-operate with Washington to counter that.
- Increased Chinese pressure in India's Northern Borders region, means that New Delhi will shelve allocating more resources to enhance its maritime capabilities and will focus on increasing its land and air capabilities.

### Summary

The recently released Australian Defence White Paper, which came a year ahead of schedule, has drawn more attention from India. Until a few years ago, India was reluctant to understand the strategic significance of the largest country in the Southern Hemisphere, which is to play a key role in the region encompassed by the geo-strategic term "Indo-Pacific".

## Analysis

The paradigm shift in India's strategic thinking was influenced by the visit of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard late last year and the shared strategic thinking outlined as a part of the visit.<sup>1</sup> Logically, the Defence White paper has drawn more attention in New Delhi because of the new significance of the geo-political term "Indo-Pacific", which has been identified by both India and Australia in recent times.

The Defence White Paper has welcomed India's "Look East" policy and noted that there is a shared strategic interest in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific, the sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific. Both India and Australia have to work on their mutual security dilemmas in the years ahead.

India's "Look East" policy is aimed at increasing its diplomatic and military presence and, if possible, extending its military presence from South-East Asia to the South-West Pacific. Australia's "Look West" policy is aimed at addressing the same strategic interests in the region.

The shared mutual interests arise in this way: India, which has primarily a defensive continental strategic orientation, has not been able to find ways to achieve consensus with its neighbouring countries for its power-projection in the South Asia region. It is trying to expand this strategic orientation by adding a maritime dimension, which is welcomed by countries in the South-East Asia region and also by Australia. The diplomatic aspect of this strategic orientation is the "Look East" policy and its military variant includes the Andaman and Nicobar Tri-Command services and the increased power-projection capabilities of the Eastern Fleet.

Australia, which has primarily a defensive maritime strategic orientation, has decided to add an offensive strategic orientation, because the latter will provide consensus among the countries in both the South-West Pacific and South-East Asian regions, in view of China's increased maritime capabilities.

The Defence White Paper 2013 expects the Australian Defence Force to have the capacity to conduct:

- Principal Task One: deter and defeat armed attacks on Australia;
- Principal Task Two: contribute to stability and security in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste;
- Principal Task Three: contribute to military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region, with priority given to South-East Asia; and
- Principal Task Four: contribute to International Peacekeeping Operations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chandramohan, B. and Buchanan, P.G., 'Assessment Brief: India-Australia Strategic Co-operation in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century', 36<sup>th</sup> Parallel Assessments Ltd (NZ), 31 October 2012. <<http://36th-parallel.com/2012/10/assessment-brief-indian-australian-strategic-co-operation-in-the-early-21st-century/>>.

From India's point of view, Principal Tasks One and Three are significant and these constitute the shared strategic interest.

The primary security threat to Australia is expected to come from the west (the Indian Ocean); to deter that requires a primarily defensive strategy. One way of extending the defensive orientation, is to build alliances before any armed attack on Australia is undertaken. Australia is on the path to building such alliances; one example is the agreement to permanently base a 2,500 strong US Marine Task Force in Darwin. Adding an offensive strategic aspect to Australia's strategic re-orientation requires upgrading and expanding the Navy. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper called for a major expansion of the submarine fleet, from six to twelve boats, by 2030.

Further, Australia's core security interests lie in the south-west Pacific and the Indian Ocean. These overlap, but are not identical to, those of its major allies, particularly the United States. The Defence White Paper 2013 constitutes a paradigm shift in Australia's strategic orientation towards the Indian Ocean; it started to pursue a policy of self-reliance in defence following the Guam Doctrine, announced by the US during the Nixon Administration. The Guam Doctrine saw the need for US allies, Australia in particular, to be as self-reliant on defence and security matters as possible, while continuing to strengthen bilateral military-to-military ties with the US. Every Australian Defence White Paper since 1976 has adhered to that vision. Australia's pursuit of strategic self-sufficiency has allowed the US to encourage its rise as an allied regional power in the Asia Pacific region, but this aspect has now changed with the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific region.

On the other hand, India understands that Australia will strengthen HMAS Stirling, also known as Fleet Base West, which is the largest base for the Royal Australian Navy. Providing Australia's Indian Ocean presence, the base is located on Garden Island, south of Perth in Western Australia. Eleven fleet units are based at HMAS Stirling, including the headquarters of the Australian Submarine Squadron. The expectation is that in the future the US Navy will also have on-going access to HMAS Stirling (US carriers currently make regular port calls at Garden Island).

Second, Australia also has a forward presence in the Cocos (Keeling) islands, which consist of two atolls and 27 islands, some 2,950 kilometres northwest of Perth and 1,272 kilometres southwest of Jakarta. The islands serve as a refuelling stop and forward base for the Royal Australian Air Force's P-3 *Orion* surveillance fleet, covering the Indian Ocean. The Cocos Islands base is to be upgraded, to support the latest generation P8-A *Poseidon* maritime patrol aircraft and the world's largest drone, the US-built *Global Hawk*. This possibility was emphasised in the Australian Defence Posture Review in 2012. The Review also mentioned that the Cocos Islands could serve as a spring board for joint US-Australian operations and power projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

On the other hand, Principal Task Three, which aims to provide for military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region, means that Australian Defence Forces will increase their existing capabilities for Out of Area Contingency Operations (OOACP). This will involve multi-national operations and this is where India will have a great interest as it is developing its own OOACP.

The Defence White Paper 2013 referred to China's continued rise as a global power and the increasing economic and strategic weight of East Asia. Australia has some concerns about China's maritime capabilities in the Asia Pacific region, and specifically the Indo-Pacific region, and the Defence White Paper has identified China's influence in the First Island Chain in East Asia.

China's maritime strategy involves the "three island chain" approach, enunciated by Admiral Liu Huaqing in 1988. By 2010, China was seeking to establish a permanent blue water presence in the first "island chain", arrayed on a Japan-Taiwan-Philippines axis and including the South China Sea. By 2025, it proposes to establish a similar presence in the second "island chain", stretching from the Aleutians through the Mariana Islands, to the east coast of Papua New Guinea, and including the Strait of Malacca. By 2050, its reach will extend to the third "island chain", starting in the Aleutians and ending in Antarctica, including waters off the shores of New Zealand and Australia.<sup>2</sup>

The newly coined term "Indo-Pacific" overlaps both the first and second of these island chains. Countries that have been wary of this island chain strategy include the United States, Australia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam.

On a separate note, India is concerned about China's apparent "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean, which infers an intention to build a string of bases around India encircling. China started by building a deep sea port on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, ten miles from one of the world's busiest shipping routes; a vast construction site is engulfing the once sleepy fishing town of Hambantota. China then helped Pakistan to build a deep sea port in the town of Gwadar in Baluchistan. In addition, China has started courting the island states in the Indian Ocean, such as the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles, by helping them with funds to boost their economies. For India, the concern is that, in the future, China might want these states to allow it to station bases in their territories in return.

The so-called "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean is a classic example of a defensive maritime strategy. This strategy was launched before the United States introduced its forward policy in the Asia-Pacific during the Obama Administration. It was established while Washington was distracted by two asymmetric conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. It is uncertain whether Beijing is giving more importance to this strategy today. Since it is a defensive strategy, however, it involves building more alliances with countries such as Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Burma, which will take a number of years. Further, China, seeking to increase its maritime capabilities, has wanted to acquire a base in Timor-Leste,<sup>3</sup> prompting concerns in Canberra and Jakarta.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles', Saunders, Yung, Swaine & Yang, (Eds), Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press: Washington DC, 2011. <<http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/books/chinese-navy.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Dorling, P., 'Chinese Bid To Set Up East Timor Spy Base', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 2011. <<http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/chinese-bid-to-set-up-east-timor-spy-base-20110509-1efwo.html>>.

On the other hand, India, seeking to counter the “String of Pearls” strategy, developed a maritime strategy involving: naval diplomacy in the South-East Asian countries; strengthening the Eastern Command based in Vishakhapatnam; and the Tri-Command services in the Andamans and Nicobars. This was a paradigm shift from the existing defensive continental strategic thinking, to a more offensive maritime strategic thinking, which involves effective power projection into the South-West Pacific.

Both Australia and the United States have welcomed India’s power projection into the South-West Pacific. Australia’s strategic partnership with India is based on this, because Australia’s Defence budget was slashed to just 1.56 per cent of GDP, its lowest level since the days of the Great Depression.

Now, with lower defence spending, the question is whether Australia will be able to undertake military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region, especially its priority area of South-East Asia. Another question is, whether it will be able to deter any armed attacks on its own soil.

India’s power projection into the South-West Pacific and the forward base policy of the US in the region will both help Australia to consolidate the existing regional status quo and its own power projection capabilities, with the help of the Western Fleet based in Perth.

Further, as pointed out in the Defence White Paper, if Australia seeks to develop its strategic partnership with India it will enhance Canberra’s existing defence capabilities in the Indian Ocean. Two further caveats are added in the Defence White Paper, however, which are of interest to India.

First, the White Paper mentioned that central to Australia’s policy is the security of South-East Asia. It says that Australia’s neighbours in that region sit astride Australia’s northern approaches. Any potential aggressor would have to operate through those areas to sustain armed attacks on the major sea lanes that are critical to Australian and regional trade. We would be concerned if potentially hostile powers established a presence in Southeast Asia that could be used to project military power against Australia.

Second, the White Paper also identifies the stability and security of Indonesia as of singular importance. It mentions that Australia benefits from having a strong and cohesive Indonesia as a partner to its north; as Indonesia also benefits from a secure Australia to its south. The White Paper calls for increased defence co-operation between the two countries.

In the same vein, India and Indonesia have signed naval co-operation and defence agreements.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to curtail an increased Chinese naval presence in the South China Sea, India will help Indonesia to make the transition from its continental strategic orientation, by adding depth to its maritime capabilities. It is yet to be seen whether this will be accepted by Australia, as there are disagreements between Jakarta and Canberra on how

---

<sup>4</sup> McArdle, J., ‘Wading out to Sea: The Evolution of India and Indonesia’s Naval Mindset towards Multilateralism’, Occasional Paper № 34, Observer Research Foundation: New Delhi, June 2012. <[http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/occasionalpaper/attachments/op\\_34\\_1342006228215.pdf](http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/occasionalpaper/attachments/op_34_1342006228215.pdf)>.

Indonesia handles the political situation in the troubled Indonesian provinces of Aceh and West Papua.

On the other hand, with increased Chinese naval expansion in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, India will strengthen the operational capabilities of its Eastern Fleet and Australia will do likewise with its Western Fleet. Both of these fleets will increase their engagement with the US Navy's Fifth and Seventh Fleets.

Further, Principal Task Two, which stresses the importance of the South Pacific region, is also important to India, which has been trying to expand the range and scope of the "Look East" policy beyond the South-East Asia region into the South Pacific.

India has no military presence in the Pacific, but is trying to expand its diplomatic presence, especially in the South Pacific where there is a significant Indian Diaspora. Fiji, which is expected to have elections in September next year, will feel increased pressure from Canberra for a quick transition to democracy. India is likely to support the military regime in Fiji, in contrast to Australia's continued calls for democracy. That is due to the Bainimarama regime having support from the majority of Fijian Indians and also Fiji's increased "Look North" policy. It remains to be seen whether there will be engagement or a disagreement between India and Australia on this front.

### Conclusion

Both India and Australia intend to expand their maritime capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, as a way of countering Beijing's increased military capabilities in the region. India's role will be welcomed by countries in the region, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The outer strategic arc to contain Beijing's maritime capabilities will be provided by the United States, with inner security arrangements provided by countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

There is one possible variant to this arrangement. If India feels more threatened by the Chinese military presence on its Northern Borders, such as the recent border incident at Leh in Ladakh, it will not hesitate to give more attention to increasing its Army and Land capabilities. This could include envisaging the formation of three mountain strike forces, meaning that India would have to shelve its plans for naval expansion, which may be of concern to countries that are involved in maritime strategic co-operation with India, such as Australia. This scenario was not discussed in the Australian Defence White Paper.

\*\*\*\*\*

**About the Author:** Balaji Chandramohan is Editor of the 'Asia for World Security Network' and a correspondent for Auckland-based newspaper, *Indian Newslink*. He is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the New Zealand Labour Party.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.*

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.  
80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.  
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803  
E-mail: [lluke@futuresdirections.org.au](mailto:lluke@futuresdirections.org.au) Web: [www.futuresdirections.org.au](http://www.futuresdirections.org.au)