

WATCHING BRIEF WB 16-3: DEFENCE WHITE PAPER

This report summarises the latest Defence White Paper issued by the Australian Government at the end of February 2016. It includes analysis and comment, and Quaker perspectives.

Background

Over the years many Defence White Papers have been delivered outlining plans for Australian defence. Their tone has varied from bland to alarmist depending largely on the political environment at the time as assessed by the party in power. Usually the preparation of these Papers has involved some element of public consultation, and QPLC has made submissions on several occasions.

2016 White Paper

According to the Minister for Defence, Marise Payne MP, the White Paper “represents the Government’s firm commitment to the Australian people that we will keep our nation safe and protect our way of life for future generations”. She continued that it “seeks to deepen our international security partnerships and collaborate with defence industry and science and technology research partners in support of our nation’s security”. The Minister identified the following aims for the Australian Defence Force (ADF):

- More capable, agile and potent force structure;
- Regeneration of the Navy;
- Collaboration with industry, science and technology;
- Gender equality;
- More diverse and inclusive workplace.

The White Paper was developed by an expert panel in consultation with government and nongovernment agencies and with awareness of international partners – the United States and New Zealand. There are three objectives identified:

- To deter an attack on Australia;
- To support the security of Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Pacific countries, and of South East Asia;
- To contribute to addressing threats to the rules-based global order.

In the regional and global context, the emphasis is on maintaining peace and stability in our region, working with the US to promote a rules-based global

order, combatting terrorism and regional instability from economic and social factors as well as climate change. There is a clear commitment to maintain a technological edge over potential adversaries (e.g. China). Defence cooperation programs will be expanded (already with 28 countries).

The strongest area of action proposed by the White Paper is in the acquisition of much new and expensive equipment for the ADF – submarines, frigates, aircraft carriers and patrol boats for the Navy, heavy infantry vehicles and drones for the army, and fighter jets for the air force. Bases and training will be upgraded, and the new war-fighting machines will be closely aligned with those of the US. The workforce will increase to 62,400 and will be re-deployed to suit changing needs. There will be more attention to health care (especially mental health), gender equality and diversity.

According to *Sky News* (26 February 2016), China's official response so far has been to urge Australia to "get rid of the Cold War mentality" reflected in the White Paper and to "cherish the hard-won good momentum of development in bilateral relations".

Analysis and Comment

ABC News reported on 25 February 2016 that "underscoring a sense of urgency to the renewal of Australia's defence power, the Government is aiming to build spending up to 2% of GDP by 2020/21 – earlier than previously promised – representing an overall increase of \$29.9b". This objective will be met regardless of the how the rest of the economy is going. The same report quoted the US Ambassador to Australia, John Berry, as describing the White Paper as "a well-considered, comprehensive approach to addressing evolving security challenges of the coming decades".

Defence spending as a proportion of GDP was at 1.5% in 1938. Since then it has not dropped below 1.62% (in years 2002-3 and 2012-13). In 2013-14 it was 1.71%, and was expected to increase in 2014-15. Compare the Defence budget for 2015-16 (\$31.9b) with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) budgeted total expenditure in 2015-16 of \$6.2b (including the aid and trade programs) to protect our interests internationally and contribute to global stability and economic growth, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region (according to the DFAT website).

Andrew Davies who is director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute commented on the White Paper in *The Canberra Times* on 26 February 2016. He focused on 'following the money' and said there's lots of it - \$30b across the board of defence capability. But the diminishing projections of GDP by Treasury mean that the projected 2% for defence is something of an illusion. He sees the White Paper as singling out the threat of China as the main cause of the expanded program. "Simply put, the United States-led security order we've been comfortable with in our part of the world is coming under serious challenge for the first time in decades....the White Paper nailed our colours firmly to the mast – we're on the side of the established order and are prepared to muscle up to help defend it".

Nicholas Stuart (*The Canberra Times*, 29 February 2016) said the White Paper represents a widening gulf between reality and rhetoric, because it is “built on the shallow foundation of political expediency”. The 2% target, in his view, is meaningless as it is not funded. If it to be achieved, cuts will have to be made elsewhere in the Budget. He describes the White Paper as “old fashioned and a recipe for fighting the wars of the past”. He says the White Paper has little sense of direction or the kinds of roles Australian forces could play in the future. “The undertaking to spend on regardless has nothing to do with strategy and everything to do with politics”.

Hugh White (ANU Strategic & Defence Studies Centre) wrote in *The Age* on 1 March 2016 that the White Paper has failed to address the implications of China’s rise. He says it underestimates the risks of a conflict between the US and China in the South China Sea as they struggle to be the dominant power in the region. Assuming a back-down by China is wishful thinking. He asks whether following Washington’s lead is the best option, and says “we need to start thinking for ourselves about how best to deal with China’s bid for regional leadership”. He says the White Paper “fails to consider what we might want of our forces in the very different Asia now emerging”.

On behalf of the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), Nick Deane said in a media release on 29 February 2016 that “there is no justification for further diversion of finite government funds into military acquisitions”. He continued that “Australia has now effectively joined an arms race in our region. Far from promoting stability, the White Paper has already heightened the very tensions it identifies as threatening. Its effects run counter to its stated highest priority – that of keeping the Australian community safe”.

Sue Wareham, on behalf of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW), made a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (26 February 2016). She pointed out that Australia’s security needs would be better and far more affordably addressed by using at least some of the expenditure allocated for the fighters to increasing foreign aid and diplomatic efforts to reduce conflict. She drew attention to the fact that many experts regard the fighter purchase as poor value for money, unable to deliver what is promised. The Senate Committee is due to report by 1 May 2016.

The ABC Radio National program *Background Briefing* (6 March 2016) contained a significant analysis of the joint strike fighter project and the grave doubts about its cost and value to Australia. This goes alongside numerous questions over recent years about the cost over-runs on many large defence purchases.

Quaker Perspectives

QPLC has put forward submissions on several occasions about defence policies, and has made the following points: (a) defence policy should be part of a comprehensive set of policies that identify risks arising from political, economic, ecological and other sources, and set up ways to minimize those risks; (b) ecological degradation and economic crises are more of a threat to

Australia than military ones; (c) defence policies should be ensure that women are seen as equal partners in the development of inclusive security policies that lead to conflict prevention and the building of peace; (d) the defence forces has a significant role in providing humanitarian and disaster relief and as part of international policing under the UN; (e) reliance on the US military strategy limits our capacity for independent policies; and (f) more resources should be put into prevention through diplomatic and aid policies.

In a recent talk in New York, Andrew Tomlinson of the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) said security should be about mutual interdependence and not a zero sum gain. It should give priority not to military approaches but to fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies and addressing the root causes of violence. He spoke of recent research that shows that:

- jihadists are often driven by an emotional response to injustice from outside forces rather than by a religious motive;
- trading justice for security, and human rights for counter-terrorism, does not work – the focus needs to be on governance;
- the most effective approach is to work with all stakeholders in the community to build upon the resilience and strength that already exists.

Quakers are urged to seek to ‘take away the occasion of war’ in their personal and public life. This involves giving priority to those kinds of actions that strengthen listening, dialogue, accepting difference, building links among people, and working for peace and justice at all levels. The continuing domination of military approaches to international affairs remains a serious challenge for Quakers. Every opportunity needs to be taken to reiterate to those in government that there are alternatives.

Canberra
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Sources

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 ABC News 25 February 2016 www.abc.net.au/news
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