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Looking West: Australian Defence Force Posture Review

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

Australia is undertaking a comprehensive review of its defence force posture that reflects a major shift in Canberra's strategic thinking and its intention to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean.

Commentary

THE AUSTRALIAN government recently announced a wide-ranging review to assess whether the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is correctly positioned geographically to meet future strategic and security challenges. Factors driving the review include the growing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean; the increased military power projection capabilities of countries in the Asia Pacific; and the potential vulnerability of extensive offshore resource activities in Australia's north-west.

The establishment of the Defence Force Posture Review suggests major shifts in Canberra's strategic thinking and a clear intention to expand Australia's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.

Looking to the Indian Ocean

Canberra is showing increased awareness of developments in the Indian Ocean that are of strategic and economic significance to its interests. Previously, Australia focussed its strategic attention mainly to its North and the Pacific Ocean. Historically, most major Australian defence bases were located in the southeast of the continent. The Force Posture Review is likely to lead to significant shifts in the positioning of the ADF with new defence facilities on the West coast, as well as greater Australian military activity generally in the Indian Ocean.

The Review by the Department of Defence will be overseen by two leading Australian national security specialists: Dr Allan Hawke and Mr Ric Smith, both former secretaries of the Department of Defence in Canberra.

Canberra's Force Posture Review is linked with the ongoing US Global Force Posture Review. Australian Minister for Defence Stephen Smith and the then US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates announced closer collaboration between their two countries on force posture issues in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in June 2011.

This collaboration includes establishing a bilateral Force Posture Review Working Group to develop options to align Australian and US force postures in ways that benefit both countries' national security. This would include, for example, developing options for increased US access to Australian training, exercise and test ranges; repositioning US equipment in Australia; and greater use by the US of Australian facilities and ports.

While there is certainly scope for wider US access to Australian facilities, major US bases are unlikely on Australian soil. The left-wing of the Australian Labor Party, currently in power in Canberra, and the Greens Party that holds the balance of power in the Australian Senate, both have a long history of opposing increased American military presence in Australia.

China is not mentioned specifically in the terms of reference for the Review although many analysts in Australia have assessed that it is mainly a response to China's increased military capabilities. It is more likely that the review follows assessments of general regional instability with prospects of declining US influence and increased competition between the rising powers of Asia. Canberra remains very cautious of actions that might jeopardise its relations with China as its major trading partner.

Moving West

The greatest challenges to the protection of Australia's offshore sovereignty and sovereign rights lie in the Indian Ocean. About one third of Australia's maritime jurisdiction is in that ocean, including large exclusive economic zones (EEZs) around remote island territories, and large areas of extended continental shelf potentially rich in hydrocarbon resources.

Offshore developments in the west and north-west of the Australian continent have a key role in the future prosperity of the nation. Western Australia is currently experiencing its largest economic boom, due to its thriving resource sector. The state has 66% of Australia's economic demonstrated reserves of crude oil and 57% of Australia's LPG resources. The offshore rigs, floating gas platforms and pipelines being installed in these areas are vital national assets that create significant strategic vulnerabilities.

Despite the economic and strategic importance of these developments along Australia's north-west coast, the ADF currently has limited presence on that coast to support operations in the region. The Force Posture Review reflects Canberra's intention to increase the level of defence activities along and off Australia's west coast.

The terms of reference for the Review also show increased interest in the potential strategic role of Australia's offshore territories, particularly Cocos and Christmas Islands. These islands, far out in the Indian Ocean, have great strategic value to Australia, something that has been underappreciated in Canberra in the past. As Australia seeks to increase its 'strategic footprint' in the Indian Ocean, the airfield and secure anchorages at Cocos Island offer large benefits. However, the ADF currently makes relatively little use of those facilities, and Australian naval vessels rarely visit there.

Implications

The Defence Force Posture Review is a major development in Canberra with far-reaching implications both for the ADF and Australia's regional partners. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper was an important milestone in Australian strategic thinking, especially with its emphasis on maritime and force projection capabilities. However, it gave relatively little attention to broader implications of strategic changes in the region, particularly with regard to the operational posture and positioning of the ADF. The new review suggests that the last two years have seen some maturing and development of Australian strategic thinking.

The focus on the west coast suggests an appreciation in Canberra that regional strategic instability may be particularly acute in the Indian Ocean. The close links to be developed between Australian and US force postures will help buttress US presence in the Indian Ocean, as well as in the Western Pacific. This may help ease any pressure on Southeast Asian countries to receive a larger US presence that might place the relations of those countries with Beijing in jeopardy.

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