

# Australia's National Security Strategy: What Does It Mean to the Region?

RAJARAM PANDA

Visiting Faculty, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies (SLLCS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India

Affiliated Researcher, Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

On 23 January 2013, the Australian government published the country's National Security Strategy (NSS) policy document. The 58-page *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security* supersedes the one issued by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008 and is considered a supplement to *Australia in the Asian Century*, a white paper presented by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in October 2012. The document outlines Australia's security challenges, priorities, and capabilities. It reiterates Australia's determination to be part of Asia, furthering a theme in the October 2012 document. Given Australia's foreign policy priorities, one can expect a similar tone from Australia's Defense White Paper, due out in mid-2013.

The October 2012 document explored accelerations in the dramatic economic and strategic change occurring in the region and how Australia copes. It laid out a roadmap for securing Australia's prosperity and resilience in the region and the world. The January 2013 document surveys Australia's security outlook. It describes Australia's national security objectives and explains how Australia is going to meet them.

## Objectives

The document outlines four major objectives over the next five years. These are: (1) Protect and strengthen sovereignty; (2) Ensure a safe and resilient population;

(3) Secure the nation's assets, infrastructure and institutions, including physical facilities, supply chains, intellectual property, information technologies, communication networks and natural wealth, and: (4) Promote a favorable international environment to influence and shape Australia's regional and global environment to be conducive to advancing the country's interests and values.

Chapter I discusses Australia's national security objectives. Chapter II explains the evolution of Australia's strategic environment. This Chapter concludes with a summary of the important national security challenges that Australia will continue to face and the opportunities it must look to seize. Chapter III sets out Australia's fundamental approach to national security and how this approach reflects the current national security environment. Although no specific risks analysis was outlined in the paper, seven key risk areas were identified. The first is espionage and foreign interference. It notes that Australia's standing in the world, its technological and commercial strengths, and its close alliances make it an attractive intelligence target. The other risk areas are instability in developing and fragile states, malicious cyber activity, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, serious and organized crime, state-based conflict and coercion significantly affecting Australia's interests, and terrorism and violent extremism.



Australia's national security policy rests on countering terrorism, deterring and defeating attack, preserving border integrity; preventing, detecting and disrupting serious and organized crimes; promoting a secure international environment conducive to advancing Australia's interests; strengthening the resilience of Australian people, assets, infrastructure and institutions; the Australian-US alliance; and understanding and being influential in the world, particularly the Asia-Pacific.

The second part of the Strategy looks to the future. In particular, Chapter IV examines the strategic outlook to anticipate challenges and opportunities in the years ahead. It examines the shifting geopolitical environment of the Asian Century. As the *Australia in the Asian Century* made clear, Australia's national security approach aims to make most of the transformative economic and strategic changes occurring in Asia.

The National Security Strategy clearly relies on hard power for border security in which the Defense Forces and intelligence infrastructure assume an important role. This does not mean to suggest that Australia has abandoned soft power options that could supplement and enhance Australia's policy pursuits. Prime Minister Gillard also plans the formation of a national cyber security centre by 2014.

### The US Factor

The NSS document contains important signals for US policymakers. After September 11, Australia's foreign policy outlook turned toward the Asia-Pacific. But Australia now has to cope with a rising China. Though Australia has a strong presence in the region, it must secure US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. Such an Australian need comes out clearly from the NSS document. The truism, however, is that Australia and other major allies of the US need reassurance of US commitment in the wake of China's ascendance. The second-term Obama administration needs to understand this because partners in the region will carefully interpret US action. The US needs to prioritize its strategy in the Asia-Pacific to secure stability and check any untoward adventure by China that can precipitate a major crisis. The question remains: If the US would continue to see Asia as important and, how its defense cuts affect force posture in Asia? Will the US deepen its focus on economic diplomacy and trade in the Asia-Pacific?

The United States remains Australia's most important security ally. It has formed the foundation of its defense and security cooperation since the end of World War II. The alliance has proved to be a critical enabler for the development of its own military capability, besides remaining as an important anchor for peace and security in the region. The alliance binds Australia to consult Washington on mutual and complex threats and to act to meet common dangers through regular dialogues, joint training exercises, intelligence sharing, access to defense

technology, and R&D cooperation. The NSS document reinforces these and seeks reassurance from the US.

### China Factor

The report seems to overemphasize US policy toward the Asia-Pacific and China in particular. Though the Sino-American rivalry is a fact, historically tensions between the two have been neatly smoothed over with subtle diplomacy, as evidenced in the way the Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, who took refuge in the US embassy in Beijing in 2012, was handled. The NSS document overlooks how the US-China relationship is being handled even though it compromises Australian interests and overlooks diplomatic sensitivity.

Yet the NSS document still delves into examining the unique Australia-China relationship but underplays the new economic realities. The NSS reminds Australia that, like its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific, it must come to terms with a China that is now its largest trading partner, a major investor, and a rising military power in the region. The question Canberra faces is not whether it needs to accommodate China, but under what terms. The NSS makes this clear: "The importance of a deepening of our relationship with China cannot be overstated".<sup>1</sup> Although *Australia in the Asian Century*, is solicitous to China, it reveals Australians' deep concerns about what China wants and what role it intends to play in the Asia-Pacific. The Lowy Institute's 2012 poll of Australian perceptions showed continued concern about China.<sup>2</sup> While Australian perceptions of China warmed last year, 48% of those who saw China as the leading power in Asia expressed discomfort with that fact, and 40% said China is likely to become a military threat to Australia.<sup>3</sup>

As *Australia in the Asian Century* makes clear, China's military growth is a natural and legitimate outcome of its growing economy and broadening interests. The rapidity of that modernization has given rise to a degree of uncertainty or even sensitivity. The series of maritime disputes between China and some of its neighbors have exacerbated sensitivities. It is in the interests of all the countries in the region that disputes be resolved peacefully and miscalculations that could jeopardize stability and economic growth that has characterized the Asia-Pacific in recent decades must be avoided.

While Australia continued to encourage China to use its military capabilities and influence to contribute actively and positively to maintain regional peace and stability, it opts for using regional institutions to engage China that

1 *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013), p. 38.

2 See Fergus Hanson, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2012: Australia and New Zealand in the World - Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Lowy Institute, 2012).

3 Ernest Z. Bower, "Australia's National Security Strategy: Lessons from the Pivot Down Under" (*Pacific Partners Outlook*, Volume 3, Issue 2, February 2013), p. 2.



would assuage any anxiety about the prospects of the present stability in the Asia-Pacific region. China needs to be more open and transparent in its foreign policy dealings to allay suspicions by other regional powers.

### Assessment

The NSS document still struggles to clearly define Australia's relations with China, though the level of economic interdependence that has developed between the two is huge. While unwilling to accept the economic realities, Australia still looks at the US how the latter redefines the new relationship with China during Obama's second mandate. There seems to be some hesitancy in Australia to read the security scenario in the region independently, while remaining cognizant of the fact that China is its largest trading partner and a major investor. Australia's business community seems to be unwilling to put more weight on the strategic consideration over economic and business interests. This is the dilemma that Gillard faces.

The reactions in Southeast Asia to Australia's views are mixed. Australia could find itself at a strategic disadvantage because a country, such as Indonesia, has embraced the doctrine of Sino-US co-existence in the Asia-Pacific region. The ambiguity in the NSS document stems from the fact that Australia appears to be tied to the US alliance and finds difficult to define a more independent course despite the expected pressure coming from US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel that Australia toe the line in renewing its pledge for allegiance to the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

The NSS document stresses the importance of multi-lateral responses to challenges and disputes that exist in the region. But it admits that there are several forums that have emerged with overlapping interests on security and economic issues of the region. While declaring multilateralism, Australia is working with its partners to strengthen regional forums such as East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with the hope of shoring up regional stability. While Australia realizes the architecture of regional groupings is important, it is equally important to put emphasis to strengthen bilateral relations with countries that it considers important.

The NSS document also emphasizes the importance of bilateral relationships with Indonesia, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the other ASEAN regional nations. In doing so, Australia is just imitating the US and it remains unclear if Australia has any special leverage to engage the region. Australia's efforts to engage the region will be judged by the standards of what the US, China and other European nations do. Indeed, Australia's future in the Asian region has great promise. But, despite all rhetoric of maximizing the opportunities that the paper mentions,

Australia can reap dividends if it leverages the large number of Australian expatriates living in Asia, whose understanding of the region is certainly better those in Canberra. Also, Australia can use its diverse multicultural population by fostering cultural engagement with the region.

Surprisingly, the paper ignores Islamic issues completely. In a perceptive analysis of the paper, Murray Hunter criticizes the NSS document: "There are both a number of threats and opportunities stemming from the Islamic world today. The influence of Islam spreads from Morocco down to our nearest neighbor Indonesia, and the spread of Islamic jihad doctrines has potential effects on events in Russia, China, and even Indonesia. The aspiration of various Muslim communities, the growing influence of Islam on politics in the region, and the implications are very important".<sup>4</sup> Hunter says the NSS document ignores the rise of Islam, which will become a very important economic market. He argues that, "Growing Islamic affluence will have very major effects upon supply chains, of which the Asian region is preparing for. Australia has already encountered supply chain issues with Indonesia over the export of live animals".<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the NSS document has left this out, despite the prominence of supply chains. Whether intentional or an oversight, Hunter sees this as a major shortcoming in the NSS document. Though other pertinent sources of security threats are suitably mentioned, the paper is silent in recommending on remedies except when it comes to cyber terrorism.

Is this strategy document a political instrument in the hands of the Prime Minister and her Labor party as the timing of its release raises doubts on the possible intentions of the government? Bear in mind that in an election year the Gillard government has reduced government spending on defense, which has been criticized by the US. If one takes away any unforeseen episode such as a natural disaster or terrorist attack later this year, one can see a political angle in the paper rather than a serious national security narrative. Hunter concludes: "Certainly the paper doesn't outline to any great extent a wish list for better and improved security resources to achieve the paper's objectives".<sup>6</sup> Fortunately for Gillard, the opposition Liberal Party does not have a drastically different alternative view of the world.

The Australia-US alliance finds prominent space in the NSS document, underscoring the fact that it forms one of the pillars of Australia's national security strategy. Does it imply that Australia suffers from insecurity and lacks confidence to be truly an independent country?

4 Murray Hunter, "Australia's National Security Paper: A Case of Lost Opportunities?" (*Geopolitical Monitor*, 13 February 2013)

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*



While mentioning China's role in keeping Australia out of recession during the 2008 financial crisis, the NSS document underplays the prospects for fruitful security engagement. However, whether this is possible or desirable is a different matter.

Critics say the NSS document amounts to lost opportunities as issues such as soft power option, aid and trade as potentially strategic pillars in the emerging national security environment are not mentioned to be leveraged. The truism is that a government going to the polls later this year could not have done better than what the NSS document brings to the table.

**EDITOR** | Paulo Gorjão  
**ASSISTANT EDITORS** | Kai Thaler • Sean Goforth  
**DESIGN** | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)  
Rua da Junqueira, 188 - 1349-001 Lisboa  
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>  
email: [ipris@ipris.org](mailto:ipris@ipris.org)

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