Australia's new defense white paper likely to highlight regional challenges and a stiffened security resolve by Ross Babbage

Ross Babbage is a Foundation Governor of the Institute for Regional Security, Managing Director of Strategy International (ACT) Pty Ltd and a former senior official in the Australian Department of Defence. A more detailed analysis of these and related themes, entitled Game Plan, is being published in Canberra this week by the Menzies Research Centre.

The Abbott government is set to launch its first defense white paper in coming weeks. More than 12 months in the making, it is expected to address directly the more troubling security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and spell out a more robust defense strategy and investment program.

Australian security planners have sharpened their judgments about the more challenging security environment since the last Australian defense white paper in 2013. Six themes feature strongly in current security debates in Canberra.

First, Australian security planners are coming to terms with the shifting global power balance. The Western allies no longer dominate the Western Pacific economy. Despite recent wobbles, economic growth rates in China, India, and other developing economies in the region are projected to remain higher than those of the United States, Japan, or Australia for at least the next two decades.

Second, Australia's strategic thinkers note the massive scale of China's military expansion. They appreciate that China's asymmetric strategy places strong emphasis on building surveillance, missile, submarine, counter-satellite, cyber, and other capabilities that place at risk the Western allies' concentrated bases, conventional force structures, and vulnerable logistic systems.

Beijing's assertive international strategy is an even more powerful driver of Australian security concerns. The consensus is that the regime in Beijing is championing nationalist causes largely to reinforce its domestic legitimacy. That has driven the Chinese to launch aggressive cyber operations against Australia and its close allies, engage in dangerous confrontations with Japanese forces in the East China Sea, harass US ships and aircraft and dredge up new islands in the South China Sea.

A fourth factor that worries many Australians is their perception that the United States has morphed into a less confident and more hesitant ally. While acknowledging that Washington has announced a rebalancing of its forces to the Pacific, with some 60 percent of US naval and air assets planned for deployment to the theater by 2020, they have also noted that the resources to implement the rebalance have been limited; US readiness levels have fallen; and Washington has shown itself to be easily distracted by crises elsewhere.

In short, the view of many Australian strategic thinkers is that the strategic tides in the Indo-Pacific have been flowing against the United States and its allies. Symptomatic of the shift is that during the last decade, China's defense spending quadrupled whereas US defense spending rose by a total of only 12 percent.

For Australia, the strategic implications of these developments are profound. During the Cold War, the center of superpower competition, tension, and potential conflict was in Central Europe. Australians got used to being located in a strategic backwater. But now the situation is markedly different. Australians suddenly find themselves close to the center-stage of major power competition, international tensions and potential conflict.

Australian defense and security planners are even more worried by the outlook for the coming 20-30 years. Japan, India, and most countries in Southeast Asia broadly share Australia's unease.

The new defense white paper can be expected to address this more challenging strategic environment and review strategy for the coming two decades. There is a clear need for Australia's independent defence capabilities to be reinforced and for the government to confirm its commitment to increase defense spending to at least 2 percent of GDP.

Given the heightened security concerns of most of Australia's neighbors a further strengthening of the country's security partnerships is needed to reinforce regional resilience and confidence.

However, no matter how much Australians try to build their independent military capabilities and strengthen regional relationships they realize that they will still be vulnerable to external coercion and attacks in the more challenging security environment now developing. There is a need to find other ways of reinforcing Australia's deterrence and defensive capabilities.

To many strategic leaders the obvious choice is to take Australia's alliance with the United States to a new level. Several practical steps could be considered. Australia has the potential to contribute more meaningfully to allied deterrence by, for instance, boosting its intelligence, surveillance and space support facilities. Canberra could also invite close allies and friends to make more use of the country's extensive and relatively uncluttered exercise and range facilities. And Australia could also invite the US to operate air, naval, army, and marine forces more extensively from Australia.

These steps would reinforce Australia's more robust defense program and substantially enhance allied deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

These are some of the issues likely to be addressed in Australia's new defense white paper. It is shaping up to be one of the most important statements of Australian defense policy in decades.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.