# Australian government unveils new interventionist military doctrine

**Mike Head**
**16 December 2000**

The Australian government released a Defence White Paper on December 6, substantially increasing military spending and enunciating a new strategic doctrine that lays the basis for further regional interventions, following the precedent set by sending nearly 5,000 troops to East Timor last year.

*Defence 2000—Our Future Defence Force* signals an underlying shift from the "Fortress Australia" strategy that has prevailed since the withdrawal of Australian and US troops from Vietnam. Next to the defence of continental Australia, the paper lists the country's primary military objective as being to "foster the stability, integrity and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood".

By "immediate neighbourhood," the government means a swathe of territory just to the north and east of Australia, from the Indonesian archipelago to the Pacific islands of Fiji—dubbed a "sea of instability" by Defence Minister John Moore. Since 1998, Australia's near region has seen the downfall of Indonesian dictator Suharto—with whom Canberra had a longstanding military alliance—East Timor's secession from Indonesia, an attempted coup in Fiji and a civil war in the Solomon Islands. Separatist movements have strengthened in various parts of Indonesia, including West Papua, as well as continuing on the Papua New Guinea island of Bougainville.

Despite its customary and cautious official language, the White Paper states that Australia will seek to maintain military ascendancy over this region, and will regard any political instability as a threat to national security. "We would be concerned about internal challenges to the stability and cohesion of neighbouring countries and concerned about any threat of external aggression against them," it declares. This doctrine would justify the dispatch of troops in the event of any serious domestic disturbances.

Similarly, the paper declares that Australia must retain military leverage over its former colony in Papua New Guinea and the entire Southwest Pacific: "Australia will seek to remain Papua New Guinea's primary defence partner, offering substantial support to PNG defence reforms. Likewise, the Government seeks to maintain our position as the key strategic partner in the Southwest Pacific and will continue to remain active in this region."

The White Paper presents a catalogue of problems that could trigger interventions. Papua New Guinea is described as facing a "threat to national cohesion from secession movements, most particularly in Bougainville," as well as "threats to the security of legitimate government from unlawful and violent challenge, including by elements within the armed forces". In fact , *Defence 2000* queries PNG's survival, insisting that "if Papua New Guinea's problems continue, its ability to handle future challenges will be hampered, and its viability as an effective state could come into question".

In the Pacific Islands, "deep-seated ethnic and political problems ... pose threats to law and order, legitimate government and even national cohesion... Their resulting vulnerability will continue to be a strategic concern for Australia." The White Paper underscores Canberra's military predominance in the southwest Pacific by noting that through the Pacific Patrol Boat project and other programs, some 70 Australian military advisers are posted to Pacific island states, and about 400 Pacific military personnel receive training in Australia each year.

Two days after releasing the White Paper, Prime Minister John Howard indicated a possible expansion in the 50-strong contingent sent to police a ceasefire in the Solomon Islands. He noted that Australia now has forces in three regional locations: the Solomons, East Timor—where nearly 2,000 troops remain—and Bougainville, where close to 300 soldiers are on peacekeeping duty.

In order to assemble the necessary manpower and firepower for further interventions, *Defence 2000* announces the first major boost to military spending since Vietnam. Funding will be increased by $23.5 billion over the next decade, considerably more than the $3.5 billion figure earlier leaked to the media. The military budget will be raised by some 3 percent a year in real terms, starting with a $500 million increase in 2001-02 and $1,000 million in 2002-03, so that by 2010, the total annual allocation will be $16 billion (inflation-adjusted), compared to this year's $12.2 billion.

During the final preparations for the White Paper, sharp conflicts erupted within the Howard cabinet, accompanied by the leaking of National Security Council debates to the media, over where the money would be spent—on ground forces or on more sophisticated aerial and naval weapons systems. In the final result, the real expansion of military capacity will take place in the army, not the airforce or navy.

The size of the armed forces will be increased from 51,500 to 54,000—including an expansion from four to six army brigades. Most significant is the restructuring of the army to shift its focus from large-scale mainland defence to highly mobile rapid deployment units. "The development of our land forces will take fuller account of the demands of possible short-notice operations in our immediate neighbourhood," the paper states.

The army will receive an extra $5 billion over 10 years, aimed at allowing the government to simultaneously deploy at least two strongly-armed forces—a 3,000 strong brigade and a battalion group of 1,000 troops—to separate offshore crises on short notice. Under this plan, six 1,000-strong battalion groups will be held at no more than 90 days notice to move, and most at 30 days or less. They include a parachute battalion, two light infantry air-mobile battalions, a motorised battalion, a mechanised battalion, and a commando battalion. The 700-strong Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment will also be at high readiness.

These contingents will be equipped with heavily armed reconnaissance helicopters, troop-lift helicopters, armoured personnel carriers and an array of high-technology infantry weapons, such as shoulder-fired guided missiles, improved body armour, weapons, night vision equipment and communications systems for all soldiers. Such weaponry belies the notion that these units will be primarily focused on peacekeeping.

Billions of dollars will also go to the air force and navy to purchase new

weaponry and weapons technology, almost exclusively from the United States. In the main, this spending will be required to simply replace outdated and ageing warplanes and ships. Up to 100 new combat aircraft will be purchased to replace the F/A-18 Hornet fighters and F-111 long-range bombers, reinforced by four new early warning and control aircraft and up to five air-to-air refuelling aircraft. The navy will obtain three air warfare destroyers, upgraded submarines, new patrol boats and supply and support ships, although the total number of surface warships will fall from 14 to 11 over the next decade.

Both the timing and shape of the military restructuring were dominated by the East Timor crisis, which showed the armed forces to be ill-prepared for the Howard government's rapid turn during the middle of 1999 from endeavouring to maintain Canberra's 25-year partnership with the Indonesian military to orchestrating and leading an international intervention force. Sending two rotations of 4,000 to 5,000 personnel to East Timor placed severe strains on the army's resources and could have led to disastrous defeats had the United States not agreed to back the force with logistical and intelligence support, averting any large-scale Indonesian resistance.

Ideologically too, the new military doctrine rests on the East Timor experience. As numerous media commentators and editorials have noted with satisfaction, the boosting of the armed forces would not have been possible without the Timor operation. The media, the official opposition parties and the radical protest groups, mostly led by former opponents of the Vietnam War, depicted the Timor intervention as an example of a new humanitarian military deployment. This political coalition has created the conditions for the political and military establishment to throw off the legacy of its defeat in Vietnam and embark on a new militarist policy.

"The East Timor commitment has made for a receptive political climate," the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented last week. "Mr Howard believes interest in defence has surged with a new generation free from the traumas of the Vietnam war and intensely interested in the Anzac tradition."

The White Paper also projects three broader regional and global military objectives. Within Southeast Asia, it speaks of maintaining "a resilient regional community that can cooperate to prevent the intrusion of potentially hostile external powers". Across the wider Asia Pacific region, it aims to prevent threats from "any powers whose strategic interests might be inimical to Australia's". Finally, global security is listed as a priority, with Australia supporting the US and the United Nations.

The armed forces will not be configured for major involvement in these wider theatres, however. Instead, Australia will largely act as a junior partner to the United States, upon which it has relied militarily since World War II. Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty that formally committed the US to the defence of Australia during the Cold War.

Written under some pressure from Washington, *Defence 2000* unequivocally asserts the centrality of the US alliance. This relationship, including the ANZUS Treaty, is described as a "key strategic asset that will support our bilateral, regional and global interests over the next decade and beyond". Australia's military dependence on the US is also acknowledged: "The kind of ADF [Australian Defence Forces] that we need is not achievable without the technology access provided by the US alliance."

The White Paper does refer to the likelihood that, at times, the United States and Australia will differ on issues, or the priority given them. Its language is more cautious than the first draft—a discussion paper issued in June—which placed a question mark over the reliability of the US partnership. The draft asked: "Will our interests and perceptions match those of the US closely enough for us to depend more heavily upon them?"

In July, just after the release of the draft paper, US Defence Secretary William Cohen arrived in Canberra from visiting China and, in an unusually public intervention, urged the Howard government to lift military spending to ensure that its forces were ready for joint missions with the US throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Cohen's message was followed by a visit last month from the US Pacific Commander-in-Chief Dennis Blair, who also said Australian forces should be able to fight far from home in tandem with the US.

At the time of Cohen's visit, some figures in Australian ruling circles, such as former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, expressed fears that too close ties to the US would damage Australian business and diplomatic interests in Asia, particularly in Japan and China, two of Australia's largest markets. Fraser voiced opposition in particular to Cohen's call for Australia to participate in the mooted US missile defence shield, a plan that has been bitterly denounced by China.

After tailoring the White Paper to reassure Washington, the Howard government has come under fire in the media for not more decisively boosting the military. Commentators have pointed out that the increased military spending will only represent 1.9 percent of Gross Domestic Product in 2010, the same proportion as now.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, right-wing columnist Gerard Henderson declared that, while welcome, the additional expenditure was inadequate and would not meet American calls for a budget of at least 2.5 percent of GDP. An *Australian* editorial insisted that the White Paper must be "just the start" in expanding military capacity. Its foreign editor Greg Sheridan accused the government of "spinning a White Paper story" while presiding over a continued military decline. "Our security situation is eroding in significant ways and we are not responding," he charged.

These denunciations reflect a variety of concerns. Confronted by the breakdown of one government after the other in the near region, the Australian ruling class is anxious to both prevent instability and strengthen its economic grip over the area that it regards as its particular sphere of influence. Australian-based companies have substantial investments throughout Indonesia and the southwest Pacific, including some of the largest mining projects in the world, as well as banking, manufacturing and trading businesses.

At the same time, Australia remains a relatively small power, heavily dependent on the US, which has its own interests across the wider Asia-Pacific rim and globally, including major stakes in Indonesia and large military forces in Japan and South Korea, and which is determined not to allow its might to be challenged by Japan or China. A basic dilemma remains at the heart of Australian policy, produced by the tension between the ruling elite's regional aspirations and economic dependence on Asia, on the one hand, and its military reliance on the US, on the other. This tension can only grow in the coming period.