



CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

**DEFENCE WHITE PAPER  
PROJECT**

**AUSTRALIA**

**DEFENCE STRATEGIC UPDATE**

**2020**

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## About the author

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The strategic update outlines the issues confronting Australia's strategic environment, as well as the consequences for defence planning. It establishes a new strategic policy framework, ensuring that Australia is capable of deploying military power to alter the environment, prevent activities against its interests and retaliate with military force, when essential. While the transformation drivers described in the 2016 Defence White Paper remain in place, they have escalated at a quicker rate than expected. The advent of stronger military systems facilitated by technical advancement, as well as the growing aggressive employment of a variety of grey-zone techniques to push states below the threshold for a traditional military response, are all factors that Australia currently faces. Although the long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic are unknown, it has had a significant influence on the region's and world's economies, with serious consequences for Australia's peace and stability.

According to the update, there is an increased likelihood of state-on-state violence. It also focuses on preventing grey-zone activity in Australia's outskirts. The changes are being implemented in response to the rising recognition that Australia's largely defensive armed forces are underachieving in deadliness at the top end of the conflict spectrum, in order to discourage attacks against Australia or its preferences in the medium to long term, and in mass to react appropriately to sub-conflict, grey-zone challenges.<sup>1</sup> Recognising that Australia's regional military clout will be constrained, the authors of the strategic update emphasise the significance of strengthening defence and security ties with “partners whose effective roles in the area will be critical to regional security and stability, such as Japan, India, and Indonesia”. Early regional reactions to Australia's defence policy update, especially from Indonesia, have been favourable, and a new series of trilateral maritime operations with India and Indonesia is scheduled as a sign of Australia's resolve towards influencing the situation.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update, which was released on July 1st and is a somewhat quicker revision of Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper, does take ownership of the rapidly deteriorating Indo-Pacific security environment, with increasing strategic competition (primarily between China and the US) pressuring Canberra to embrace a more independent attitude to defence and stability in the region. Recognising that Australia's regional military influence will not be designed to manage in a vacuum, the update highlights the significance of developing defence relationships and security links with regional partners, such as Japan, India and Indonesia, in terms of maintaining regional peace and security. As a result, the update establishes three complimentary goals. Building Australia's strategic environment:

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<sup>1</sup> Graham, Euan (2020). “Australia's Serious Strategic Update.”, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, July 03, Available at <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/07/apacific-australia-defence-update>

1. requires becoming an outspoken advocate for regional stability, safety and democracy, as well as deepening existing ties which facilitate this goal. The other aspect of the medal is restraining activities against Australia's objectives;
2. the competent but mostly defensive Australian Defence Forces will not be best equipped to thwart assaults against Australia or its purposes in the tough climate described.
3. The last objective is to retaliate with legitimate military force as “the likelihood of high-intensity confrontation in the Indo-Pacific, although still implausible, is becoming less remote.”

As a result, Australia is ready for such a fight if deterrent efforts fail, or to defend the US and other allies when the Australian national interests are at stake. Among these goals is the notion of self, which is a well-established idea in Australia's defence policy but was never completely implemented due to the Asia-lengthy Pacific's atmosphere of peace. Although the report is cautious in its wording, it highlighted the role of strong international connections in parallel to those with the United States. The budget will keep going up over 2% of GDP and at a rate higher than it was before the Covid-19 pandemic erupted, reflecting these aspirations. The budget is expected to expand by 87.4% over the next decade, relative to the starting point of 2019–20. Within the next 10 years, financing will climb to A\$73.7 billion by 2029-30. The total funding of A\$575 billion over the decade includes roughly A\$270 billion in capacity investment, opposed to A\$195 billion when the 2016 Defence White Paper was presented for the period 2025-26. It is worth noting that budget allocations underscore the importance given to the maritime sector, which receives 28% of the financing, followed by the air sector (24%) and the land sector (14%) (20%). It reflects Australia's strategic readjustment towards its immediate neighbourhood along with the possibility that several new naval constrictions will not be operational until beyond 2030.

Whilst the update acknowledges that Australia's military services may be called upon to battle as part of a coalition in far-flung implementations to the Middle East, it also asserts an intensified geographic perspective on future dangers to Australia and its 'immediate region,' which is liberally interpreted as elongating from the northeast Indian Ocean to the southwest Pacific. In a significant move, the update reaffirms Canberra's traditional loyalty to the US alliance while also stating that it is "vital" for the Australian Defense Force (ADF) to "increase its self-reliant ability to deliver adverse effects".<sup>2</sup> Self-reliance is a long-standing concept in the Australian defence policy, dating back to the post-Vietnam era, but for a country which has never had to go to war on its own, this marks a substantial shift in strategy formulation

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<sup>2</sup> Boubtane, Dhiya (2021). “A Strategic Revolution? Australia’s New Defence Policy in a Troubled Indo-Pacific.” IGE. June 15. Available at <https://www.institutegreatereurope.com/single-post/a-strategic-revolution-australia-s-new-defence-policy-in-a-troubled-indo-pacific>

following a long period of calm in the Asia-Pacific. Although the strategic update confirms Australia's dependence on the United States for protracted nuclear deterrence, the rationale of growing deterrent self-reliance is expected to push Canberra to pursue an autonomous nuclear capability very seriously. Such a conclusion would only be made if Australia's strategic environment deteriorated dramatically but considering the length lead times and the termination of strategic warning time, that prospect is now becoming more real. The importance attached to sensors and logistical depth, including the delivery of specialised munitions and fuel, is yet another indication of gravity in the defence update and force position plan.<sup>3</sup> The press has focused on the importance of long-range striking capacities. Australia has had a history of strike capability, having previously fielded aircraft carriers and the long-range F-111 fighter jet. However, it is the first time it has expressed interest in acquiring long-range missiles. Instead of a single system, all three services may wind up operating a combination of land, air and sea-launched missiles, including several hyper sonics. This advances Australia nearer to a future position that includes a sense of 'deterrence by punishment,' not just 'deterrence by denial,' in the cyber realm.

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<sup>3</sup> Townshend, Ashley and Thomas-Noone Brendon, (2020). "Australia Steps up in Defense of the Indo-Pacific Order.", *The Diplomat*, September 01. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/australia-steps-up-in-defense-of-the-indo-pacific-order/>

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