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In search of smart power

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THE Defence establishment has been startled by a suggestion that those writing the new Defence white paper should take strategic advice from the blue-ringed octopus, venomous spiders and assorted poisonous snakes. Advertisement

With the Government set to announce this week the details of a new blueprint for the defence of Australia, Allan Behm has urged lateral thinking to deal with the unique problem of how to defend 20% of the world's surface - including the Exclusive Economic Zone in the surrounding oceans - with just 0.3% of its population.

Behm, the former head of the Australian Defence Force's international policy unit, makes the point that the continent's fanged fauna has evolved, and advertises defensive capabilities that are small but "decisively lethal" and that is what Australia needs.

Any potential attacker need to know that Australia possesses, for instance, a powerful force of submarines able to hide thousands of kilometres from home and capable of lobbing a cruise missile into the attacker's capital city, destroying its shipping or closing its ports.

That could be accompanied by an ability to wage cyber warfare by bringing down an enemy's computer networks, causing drastic economic damage and significantly reducing the enemy's ability to fight.

The goal, says Behm, is to make any potential enemy aware that taking Australia on would be too costly to be worth the effort.

That would require a force of 12 or 15 submarines able to fire cruise missiles and drop special forces on enemy territory.

"We should be planning a lethality which exploits the ocean," he says. "I would trade off a lot of other capabilities in favour of submarines to attack the arterial systems and the nervous systems of your adversaries.

"We need to have computer network attack as very much part of our war fighting capacity. Countries spend a lot of time and effort trying to do that, but we don't."

Hints have emerged that while the Defence Department will oversee preparation of the white paper, the document will embrace much more than the traditional talk of tanks and ships and aircraft, "defence of Australia" and "expeditionary capability". It will take in factors ranging from the quality of education and technology, health services, diplomacy and international aid to high-tech warfare and pilotless warplanes.

The executive director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Allan Gyngell, says it is certainly time for a new defence white paper: "But any serious review of our security in the next 15 years needs to begin with a comprehensive assessment of the strategic environment we face in the world and to encompass the other instruments, economic and diplomatic, that Australia can use to protect and expand our security interests."

ANU professor Hugh White, one of Australia's most prominent defence commentators, prepared the 2000 white paper as a senior official in the Defence Department. He says the Rudd Government now has a chance to recast defence priorities, to link spending priorities with strategic objectives.

White is highly critical of defence decisions made by the Howard government, saying little effort had been devoted to considering whether the multibillion-dollar purchases were actually needed.

The key question, he says, is for Australia to decide what forces it would need in 25 or 30 years from now, even in situations that seem a remote possibility today.

"Questions like these," he wrote recently: "What kind of support would we want to be able to give the US in a war with China over Taiwan ... Should we have an army big enough to take military control of Papua New Guinea if civil order there broke down?"

White says the Howard government committed billions of dollars on big new tanks, giant transport aircraft, huge amphibious ships, massively expensive new destroyers, and the notorious F/A18 Super Hornets, all without analysing whether these investments offered the most cost-effective way to meet Australia's long-term strategic needs.

Army chief Peter Leahy has argued strongly that the tanks are needed to protect Australian troops in a "Black Hawk down situation" - a reference to the 1993 episode in Somali where US commanders without armour battled to rescue a force of soldiers pinned down in the capital.

And the Australia Defence Association has urged the Government to build on the investment of the previous government rather than trying to reinvent the wheel.

The association has argued that assessing Australia's strategic challenges over future decades should be based on a formal intelligence.

"Such influences usually coalesce around the failed notion that the future can be predicted with such accuracy that the structure of the ADF can be decided in detail decades into the future."

Yet Behm insists that the white paper needs a very different approach in a much-changed world.

The Government is capable of drawing on a much broader range of views, he says, along the lines of the "Smart Power" thesis promoted by former US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, who believes that America must revitalise its ability to inspire and persuade rather than merely rely upon its military might.

Much of Australia's defence thinking has been built around the primacy of United States power and that must change, Behm says.

"What we now need to understand is that that power is challenged," he says, "and we need to have a different set of strategic guidance principles that are going to allow us to go forward ... and to do that in a way which not only enhances our security but reduces the prospect of armed conflict within our region.

"To do that we need to have a very much more strategically focused diplomacy, which builds up relationships and a defence force which is ultimately able to prevail because it has capacities within it that are so difficult to counter that nobody is going to want to attack us."

Behm says more than enough money has been thrown at Defence and much of this had been "pissed out the window".

"We have not been able to focus on those capabilities which make a strategic difference to us.

"We've focused on the replacement or maintenance of capabilities which were useful in the 20th century but will be much less useful in the 21st century."

One example, says Behm is what he calls "inhabited fighters" - jets with pilots.

"What are we defending ourselves against? Why are we buying these things? What are we going to do with the Abrams main battle tanks? We need to focus very sharply on what our our priorities need to be."

The big threat to defence, he says, is the present inability to raise, train and retain troops.

In nature creatures developed just the defensive capabilities they needed.

"They don't have everything. There's no such thing as a poisonous elephant. They trample things down and smash them with their tusks.

"We've got to go back to putting a lot of discipline into our purchases. That has evaporated over the past decade."

Some US defence specialists have calculated that in a naval battle in the Taiwan Strait a surface warship - even one of Australia's three planned and potent air warfare destroyers - would be the target of so many incoming missiles that it would survive for about 20 minutes.

Behm agrees with that view. "We've come to the stage now where if we were to put any of our surface ships against an adversary the size of India or China they would be sunk."

He says Australia would field troops in places like East Timor, the Solomons, potentially Papua New Guinea and even Fiji if there is a big inter-racial meltdown there.

Behm says the White Paper will have much less emphasis on the so-called "war on terror" than in other defence documents in recent years.

"I don't think Australia is as threatened by terrorist events as the previous government found it convenient to suggest," he says.

"I think that was all playing to feelings of fear and insecurity and just as most of the prosecutions have fallen over, so have the trials fallen over."

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