

# The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy

Written by Benjamin Robbins

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BENJAMIN ROBBINS, MAR 11 2015

### **How Did Australian Attitudes to National Defence Change in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century in Relation to Asia? What Have Been the Major Paradigm Shifts and What Attitudes Do They Reflect?**

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Australia's national security policies were shaped by fear and anxiety towards Asia. These fears shifted and evolved throughout the decades, but strategic contingencies continued to focus Australia's resources at defending the nation from its northern neighbours. It was not until the end of the Cold War in 1989 that Australia began to seek security 'in Asia' rather than 'from Asia'. This essay will examine three fundamental shifts in the nature of Australia's defence policy as it transitioned in response to perceived threats in the Asian region. Firstly, it will outline how Cold War fears of a communist plague spreading southward through Asia initiated Australia's 'forward defence' posture, a strategy that underpinned the decisions to commit forces to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. It will then examine how the withdrawal of British forces from Asia and the Nixon Doctrine conflated with a re-evaluation of strategic threats to bring about 'Defence of Australia', a self-reliant policy of continental defence. Finally, it will be contended that the end of the Cold War initiated the Australian government's shift towards a policy of engagement with Asia that was focused on regional stability and human rights.

For the first two decades of the period in question, Australia's attitude towards national defence was predicated on the fear of communism spreading southward through Asia. It also reflected the country's traumatic experience in the Second World War. Since Federation in 1901, Australians had been nervous about the fragility of the nation's island boundaries and their tenuous proprietary hold over the vast continent.[1] The rapid advance of Japanese forces in WWII had confirmed the worst fears of Australia's public, military strategists and politicians alike.[2] Australia was indeed vulnerable to attack from countries in Asia. These fears were exacerbated by the fundamental changes that were occurring in the region during the post-war era. In 1950, the USSR secured an East Asian ally in the People's Republic of China, which had been proclaimed one year earlier following the triumph of Mao Zedong's Communist Party.[3] Communist uprisings had also erupted in Malaya, Vietnam and the Philippines. Moreover, Australia's perceived vulnerability increased as a result of growing anti-colonial movements, which saw her Imperial allies begin their withdrawal from Asia.[4] A clear anxiety had developed towards the communist revolutions that were occurring in the region and this was matched by a fear of post-colonial uncertainties.

These fears and the emerging Cold War provide a context for the decision of the Australian government to align itself with the security policies of America, Britain and other Western European nations.[5] The foundation of Australia's attitude towards national defence was now distinctly anti-communist. With its long held fears confirmed and an emerging post-war strategic situation in the region that was a serious cause for concern, it was both natural and inevitable that Australia would concentrate its defence policy on Asia.[6] As the next two decades unfolded, the anti-communist paradigm dominated Australia's defence policy frameworks.

'Forward defence' emerged in 1950 as the policy that was to protect Australia from the outward expansion of international communism.[7]. To be successful in protecting Australia from its fears, two components of 'forward defence' needed to be implemented. Australia required a strong system of military alliances and the forward deployment of troops into the Asian region.[8] With the signing of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security

# The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy

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Treaty (ANZUS) in 1951 and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1955, the Menzies government believed it had successfully tied the strategic interests of Britain and the US, Australia's 'great and powerful friends', to Asia.[9] These treaties were designed to have a stabilizing influence over the volatile region. SEATO guaranteed collective security in the event of further communist expansion in Asia and the ANZUS treaty secured Australia under the American 'nuclear umbrella'.<sup>[10]</sup> The need for protective screens of this nature had become clear to policy makers after the invasion of South Korea by the communist North in June 1950.<sup>[11]</sup> When signed in 1951, the ANZUS treaty received significant popular support in Australia.<sup>[12]</sup> This demonstrates that the fear of a communist 'plague' spreading through Asia was not just a prominent feature in the nation's security discourse, it was also a widely held attitude of the Australian populace.

In combination with this strong alliance system, 'forward defence' also required the deployment of Australian forces in Asia. Significant debate surrounds the reasons behind the commitment of Australian forces to conflicts under the mantra of 'forward defence'. To some commentators, this element of the policy is seen as instrumental to containing communism and avoiding any eventuation of the 'domino theory'. Field argues that a common strategic theme of forestalling any and all threats to territorial Australia was the true desire of the Menzies government when it committed Australian forces to the Korean and Vietnam Wars in 1950 and 1965 respectively.<sup>[13]</sup> Other scholars have been more critical, noting that Australia's involvement in conflicts throughout this period were a "payment of insurance premiums for (American) protection."<sup>[14]</sup> McNeill suggests that Australia demonstrated such willing involvement in Korea and Vietnam because it would have helped in eliciting American assistance if external forces ever threatened the Australian mainland.<sup>[15]</sup> It is however too simplistic to suggest that by engaging in 'forward defence', the Menzies government was just accumulating diplomatic credit so that America would feel obligated to protect Australia.<sup>[16]</sup> Attempts to secure an American security guarantee definitely played a part in the decision to deploy forces to these conflicts, but the main aim of 'forward defence' was regional stability and the immediate protection of Australian interests. These are divisive interpretations of the policy, but from both it remains clear that Australia's attitude towards national defence was predicated on the distinct fear of communism spreading through Asia and the need to protect Australia from it.

Up until the early 1970s, Australia relied on its alliance system and the deployment of forces under the proviso of 'forward defence' to protect itself from perceived threats in Asia. Significant change was however occurring in the nation's attitude towards defence from the mid 1960s, when the strategic environment of Asia began to shift again. The policy of 'forward defence' was dealt a fundamental blow in 1966 when the British government announced it would be withdrawing its forces from 'east of Suez'.<sup>[17]</sup> Three years later the integrity of Australia's defence policy was weakened further when the United States announced the Nixon Doctrine.<sup>[18]</sup> This outlined the American plan to disengage militarily from South Vietnam. It also declared that America would be gradually withdrawing from the region and it would be necessary for allied nations to take primary responsibility for their own security needs. This impacted significantly on the ability of 'forward defence' to protect Australia. The regional engagement of strong allies and the intervention of Western coalitions when threats emerged was no longer a possibility.<sup>[19]</sup> Australia was again left feeling isolated from its Western allies in the Asian region. This attitude and the belief that Australia still needed to be defended 'from Asia', led the newly elected Whitlam government to restructure Australia's defence policy.<sup>[20]</sup> After consulting the Defence Department's classified 1971 *Strategic Basis* paper, the new government announced that it would be replacing 'forward defence' with an independent strategy known as 'Defence of Australia'. Horner encapsulates the need for such a shift succinctly; noting that a policy of self-reliance was far better suited to Australia's defence needs in the era of changing strategic circumstances.<sup>[21]</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the evolving nature of strategic circumstances in the region was not confined to Australia's relations with its allies. 'Defence of Australia' also reflected a re-evaluation of the threat that Asia posed to Australia. By 1968, the spectre of countries in Asia falling to communism was no longer a dominant focus of Australia's attitude towards national defence. <sup>[22]</sup> It was clear to defence strategists that domestic communism had been decisively defeated in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.<sup>[23]</sup> The understanding had also been reached that it was unlikely Thailand would fall to communism and in 1969 the United States came to an accord with China.<sup>[24]</sup> These factors and the perception that the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was going to have a positive influence on regional stability were significant in the re-evaluation of Australia's defence policy and attitudes towards it.<sup>[25]</sup> Australia was now in a situation where it faced no direct and identifiable threat.<sup>[26]</sup>

# The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy

Written by Benjamin Robbins

This did not however, give Australia a sense of security. In fact, this uncertainty developed a greater anxiety towards the region. McCraw argues that it was this ambiguity and the withdrawal of allied forces from the region that focused the government on defending the immediate approaches to the Australian continent.[27] Contrary to this, Cheeseman postulates that the need to defend Australia's northern air-sea gap emerged from the fear of an armed and hostile Indonesia.[28] These theories demonstrate clearly that even after the era of 'forward defence', Australia's attitude towards security was built fundamentally on fear and the continuing need to seek security 'from Asia'.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 ushered in a new era in Australia's national security discourse. The uncertain nature of threats in Asia continued to be a dominant feature of strategic policy, but the government's approach to combating such challenges shifted dramatically.[29] For the first time, Australia aimed at security 'in Asia', rather than 'from Asia'. In 1987 Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans announced that the country's defence forces were restructuring in a way that would have "relevance not only for the defence of Australia, but for the region as a whole." [30] This new policy conflated the notion of self-reliance with regional cooperation to promote preventative diplomacy and conflict-resolution.[31] It encouraged participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, while it also developed a network of bilateral defence links with states in the region.[32] The most significant aspect of this new regionalist policy was the emphasis placed on stability. The priority given to Asia in the 1990s under the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments was built firmly around the belief that Australia could not be secure in an insecure region.[33] This notion was an important factor that influenced Australia's decision to involve itself with the crises in Cambodia and East Timor.

Policy makers were of the opinion that if Australia was to remain secure, the government would need to actively promote and enforce stability in the region. This became possible with the thawing of Cold War tensions in 1989, as UN sanctioned humanitarian interventions became possible. Australia played a key role in mobilising an international response to the humanitarian crisis that was occurring in Cambodia in the early 1990s.[34] Australia led the United Nations response and took responsibility for the country's affairs until elections were held and order was restored. Australia's commitment to regional stability and the protection of human rights was again on display in 1999 when it led a UN sanctioned force into East Timor. Australia had been authorised to use all necessary measures in the effort to re-establish peace and security in the nation as it struggled for independence.[35] These interventions were seen as essential for ensuring Australia's security, as the stability of Cambodia and East Timor contributed to that of the entire region.[36] In the post-Cold War era, it is clear that Australia was still fearful of instability and uncertainties in Asia. However, its willingness to seek security 'in Asia', rather than from it, represents a fundamental shift in the nation's attitude towards defence.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Australia's fears of Asia shaped its attitude towards national defence. The strategies that were invoked to protect the nation from perceived threats in the region evolved through the decades, but it is clear that these policies were built fundamentally on fear and the need to protect Australia 'from Asia'. Even when the Hawke government shifted defence strategies in the late 1980s and sought security 'in Asia', fear remained the predicating factor. This essay has mapped the evolution of Australia's anxiety towards Asia, linking it explicitly to the paradigm shifts in defence strategy. These fears and anxieties continue to influence the nature of Australia's defence policy, and this appears set to endure into the future.

[1] David Lowe, *Menzies and the 'Great World Struggle'*, (Sydney: UNSW press, 1999), pp.6-7

[2] Anthony Burke, *In Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety*, (Sydney: Pluto Press Australia, 2001), pp.68

[3] Lowe, *Menzies*, pp.43

[4] Christopher Waters, 'After Decolonization: Australia and the Emergence of the Non-aligned Movement in Asia, 1954-55', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, (12:2, 2001), pp. 156

[5] David Horner, 'Security Objectives', in *Australian Foreign Policy: into the new millennium*, eds F.A. Mediansky, (Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia, 1997), pp.79

# The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy

Written by Benjamin Robbins

- [6] Alan Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy 1938-1965*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp.197
- [7] Graeme Cheeseman, 'From forward defence to self-reliance: Changes and continuities in Australian defence policy 1956-90', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, (26:3, 1991), pp.430
- [8] Andrea Benvenuti, 'The British Withdrawal from South East Asia and its Impact on Australia's Cold War Strategic Interests', *Cold War History*, (5:2, 2005), pp.190
- [9] Chris Field, 'What factors led to Australian military involvement in the Vietnam conflict between 1962 and 1972?', *Journal of Australian Naval History*, (4:2, 2007), pp.11
- [10] Field, 'Australian military involvement', pp.11
- [11] Watt, *Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy*, pp.121 & 123
- [12] Watt, *Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy*, pp.301
- [13] Field, 'Australian military involvement', pp.10
- [14] David McLean, 'Australia in the Cold War: A Historiographical Review', *The International History Review*, (23:2, 2001), pp.302
- [15] Ian McNeill, *The Team- Australian Army Advisors in Vietnam*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984), pp.4
- [16] Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.79
- [17] Felid, 'Australian military involvement', pp.19
- [18] Stephan Fruhling, *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945*, (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, 2009), pp.22
- [19] Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Australia in Southeast Asia', in *Australian Foreign Policy: into the new millennium*, eds F.A Mediansky, (Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia, 1997), pp.254-255
- [20] Graeme Cheeseman, *The Search for Self Reliance: Australian Defence Since Vietnam*, (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd, 1993), pp.9
- [21] Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.80
- [22] Fruhling, *Australian Strategic Policy*, pp.25
- [23] Fruhling, *Australian Strategic policy*, pp.23
- [24] Fruhling, *Australian Strategic Policy*, pp.23
- [25] Thayer, 'Australian and Southeast Asia', pp.255
- [26] Horner, 'Strategic Objectives', pp.83
- [27] David McCraw, 'Change and continuity in strategic culture: the cases of Australia and New Zealand', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, (65:2, 2011), pp.170-171

# The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy

Written by Benjamin Robbins

[28] Cheeseman, *Search for Self-reliance*, p7

[29] McCraw, 'Change and continuity', pp.172

[30] Gareth Evans, Quoted in, Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.84

[31] Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.86

[32] Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.86

[33] McCraw, 'Change and continuities', pp.173

[34] Ann Kent, 'Human rights', in *Australian Foreign Policy: into the new millennium*, eds F.A Mediansky, (Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia, 1997), pp. 175

[35] Burke, *Invasion Anxiety*, pp.217

[36] Horner, 'Security Objectives', pp.87

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# **The Fear of Asia and Changes in Australian National Defence Policy**

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