

Book Review

How to Defend Australia

Hugh White

(Melbourne: Black Inc., 2019)

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Reviewer: Chris Farnham

Hugh White has taken considerable criticism for arguments he makes in *How to Defend Australia*. But in addressing how to secure the nation amidst an uncertain regional order, stimulating discussion is one of his key aims. Since publication of his 2010 Quarterly Essay, *Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing*, Hugh has been inviting us into a stream of consciousness, of sorts, as he interprets the power dynamic in the Indo-Pacific. This book is unlikely to be the conclusion of that conversation, but it puts a finger on a number of points that Australians must consider as the future of the region becomes less clear.

White explains how he would structure and posture the Australian defence forces to deter or respond to attempts to attack the Australian mainland with military force. Much of his position rests on the traditional concentric circles approach where Australia reigns supreme in our northern air and sea approaches and influences a regional order to deny the emergence of great and belligerent powers. Failing that, their access to the islands to our north is prevented. Nothing controversial or new there.

What follows is a novel and controversial approach on how to defend Australia. The book ends on its most sensational point, that Australia consider acquiring a nuclear capability. White does not revel in making that suggestion, indeed he recoils from it. Much of the furore the suggestion has created unfairly mischaracterises his position. White argues that Australia may only need, if anything, a second strike capability in the shape of an undersea deterrent to protect itself from nuclear blackmail. And that takes us to his second-most controversial position, that Australia should cancel its contract to purchase the French Shortfin Barracuda and instead build twenty-four to thirty-two updated versions of the Collins Class submarines locally as well as replacing the recently acquired helicopter landing ships HMAS Canberra and HMAS Melbourne with a cohort of smaller vessels.

White takes similar positions for the air force and army. He argues for drastically increasing the purchase of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft. For the army he advocates a larger light infantry force for regional stabilisation operations and guerrilla warfare strategies should the mainland be invaded. The prescriptions made within the book have stirred much consternation and discussion regarding which capabilities the nation requires and the platforms and combinations of forces that are best suited to filling those roles.

The most confounding of criticisms the book has attracted are those that claim White is surrendering to China by forecasting a US retreat from the region. How Australia acquiring nuclear weapons alongside a drastic increase in strategic platforms equates to capitulation is yet to be explained by the detractors.

One of the book's many strengths is its accessibility; the reader need be neither an expert in the technologies of war nor a master of strategy to grasp the prescriptions within. White's writing style and his ability to explain esoteric concepts allows any reader to understand him. Where the book is less convincing though is its reason to exist at all.

The premise for why Australia needs to rethink how it defend itself, and indeed the entire discussion from *Power Shift* onwards, is based on the assumption that the United States will retreat from the Western Pacific rather than bear the costs of confronting China's inexorable rise to regional power. The argument behind this assumption is unconvincing.

White draws on Australian Treasury forecasts that based on current trends, by 2030 China's gross domestic product will be US\$42.4 trillion, almost double that of the United States, and much of that will be translated into military power. Straight line projections are risky bets. China is a brittle empire. It has regions replete with anti-Han restlessness, it suffers from severe environmental degradation, and credit bubbles and zombie state-owned enterprises pervert the national economy. This is to name but a few of the fault lines that cross hatch the Middle Kingdom. This is not to forecast China's coming collapse but there is no shortage of fragility that may trigger a major stumble.

White heads off such a response by warning that expecting some calamity to afflict China is wishful thinking and that the only prudent course is to plan for China as *the* East Asian power. From a risk management perspective there is sense in that argument. But if Australia had always taken a risk based approach, we would also need to have looked distrustfully at the United States for the past seventy years, which hindsight tells us would have been a bad idea.

White argues that regional actors won't coalesce and resist China's rise to regional power because it will be too painful in terms of blood and treasure and the risk of nuclear warfare is just too great. White also contends that India won't become involved in the Pacific balance because China won't antagonise the South Asian power by pushing into the Indian Ocean. Given that Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh are all signatories to China's Belt and Road Initiative and given the subsequent, slow but definite establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (a balancing coalition by any other term), it seems White may be wrong on both counts. And that impacts the main premise for the rest of the book.

But this should not discourage anyone from reading it. Even discounting the premise for rethinking how to defend Australia, White puts forward many compelling suggestions on how Australia should conceive of itself and its security in the region. And that alone makes the book worth reading.

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