In 2018 the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) will release a new White Paper, setting out possible scenarios for the future conduct of Australia’s foreign policy. It would be unwise to expect any substantial, let alone radical, departure from the foreign policy format that has prevailed since at least the end of the Second World War.

One clue as to how the policy framework might be formulated may be found in the 2016 Defence White Paper. Not the least of the reasons for expecting a similarity of approach is that it has become increasingly clear that it is the Department of Defence that is the real driver of foreign policy. This has a number of dangers, not least because the mindset of military personnel and their quasi-civilian department, construes the world in a fundamentally different conceptual framework from DFAT, that at least in theory adopts a broader perspective from that of the military.

It is also inescapably the case that DFAT’s White Paper will have a non-negotiable starting point of the US Alliance being the cornerstone of Australia’s defence policy. Foreign policy initiatives must therefore be formulated within the context of whether or not what Australia wants is consistent with US geopolitical objectives.

On the practical side that process is already well advanced, with Australian military personnel already integrated into the American military structure. Other manifestations include the US spy base at Pine Gap, an integral part of the US war machine worldwide, and US military bases on Australian soil.
Australia also takes part in joint military exercises such as operation Talisman Sabre, that are clearly directed against China, or other joint military exercises, as with the current exercises that are directed against North Korea.

The fact that these and similar military exercises are directed against Australia’s largest trading partner and may therefore pose a conflict with Australia’s economic security is not something likely to be addressed in the White Paper.

To that military support, Australia also gives unwavering political support, in everything from prime ministerial statements about being “joined at the hip” with the US, to UN voting support for the violent apartheid regime in Tel Aviv, to maintaining a discrete silence about the US and UK supported war by Saudi Arabia against Yemen.

Judging by various public comments by politicians and military personnel in recent months, a fundamental underpinning of the allegiance to American imperialism (for that is exactly what it is) is the assumption that if we are attacked then the US will come to our aid. Quite who might attack us, and why, is never clearly spelt out.

An extension of that policy assumption is that (a) the US is both willing and able to come to Australia’s aid; and (b) that the US itself is not going to be rendered incapable of sustained warfare in very short order.

Assumption (a) is one that seems to rest on little more than faith. The frequently invoked ANZUS treaty does not bear the weight attributed to it, as anyone bothering to actually read its provisions would readily ascertain. It contains no guarantee greater than a commitment to “consult”, political rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding.

It is in reality a fragile basis for policy, although such a notion is unlikely to ever be canvassed in the White Paper.

Assumption (b) is even more potentially dangerous because if the US is itself incapable of inflicting unsustainable losses upon its serious adversaries, Russia and China, and is in turn itself likely to be devastated, then thinking about Australia’s position as likely to be the furthest thing from the American mind.

How realistic is this scenario? It is in my submission much be more probable than the boastful claims of US military superiority and invulnerability would encourage the Australian public to believe. The US’s ability to project military power relies upon its naval forces, especially aircraft carriers, and ICBMs able to deliver devastation to their intended targets.

Unsurprisingly, with Russia and China have invested heavily in their ability to defend against both forms of attacks, and to respond with crushing effectiveness. That analysis takes no account of the psychological effect of a conventional or nuclear attack on the US “homeland”. One has only just think of the psychological impact of the 9/11 events where only 3000 people were killed, and consider what an impact the loss of tens of millions in the space of a few minutes might be.

As any serious analyst of the current state of military technology knows, both the Russians and the Chinese have the ability to destroy the US carrier fleet and to deliver missiles onto US cities, against which the US has no real defence.

The Russians have developed for example, the Zircon 3M22 hypersonic missile that has a range of up to 1000 km and a speed of Mach 8 (9,800 km/h). It’s electronic sophistication is such that it can penetrate any defence system, and it can be launched from almost any platform (ship, submarine, land, and even a humble fishing vessel).

For an attack on remoter targets, such as the cities of its enemies, the Russians have the RS-28 Sarmat ICBM, with a range of 10,000 km and 10 to 15 independently targetable warheads. It has a maximum reported speed of 25,000 km/h (7 km/s). Its electronic sophistication is such that, as with the Zircon, there is no effective defence.

The Chinese have developed their own equivalent systems, the Dong Feng 21D and the Dong Feng 41 for short range anti-ship and long-range ICBMs respectively. The Dong Feng 41 has a range of 12,000 km and carries 8 to 10 independently targetable warheads.

It is perhaps superfluous to add that Australia has no means of defence against either the Russian or Chinese ICBMs.

In terms of defending against a counter attack the Russians have the S400 (and shortly the S500) anti-ballistic missile defence that is vastly superior to any American equivalent. It effectively gives Russia control over its air space and the adjacent territorial waters. That system has been supplied to China (and other Russian allies).

All Australian cities are within range of both the Russian in Chinese ICBM systems, contrary to some absurd remarks
made by defence department personnel earlier this year. The notional defence that Australia has is the alleged American guarantee, which, it is suggested, is not a sound basis upon which to rely.

Even if the guarantee were real, military capacity and effectiveness would remain a serious question. Again, these are issues unlikely to be openly addressed in the White Paper.

It is to be hoped that the forthcoming DFAT White Paper will at least consider these brutal realities when proposing future policy frameworks. That is almost certainly a vain hope. Instead, one can expect more of the same old delusional thinking, and with it the very real risk of exposing Australia to an uncertain security future. That risk is enhanced by Australia’s continued willingness to join in the US’s wars of choice where there is no discernible Australian security interest.

As much as our foreign policy and defence mandarins may resist it, the fact is that the geopolitical world is undergoing rapid change and the comfortable certainties of past decades are no longer good enough.

Australia has an opportunity to grasp the challenges and formulate a real national interest policy for the 21st century. The chances are that it will not.

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