

Chapter 1

The purpose and focus of the White Paper¹

1.1 The White Paper issued on 12 February 2003, *Advancing the National Interest*, provides an elaboration of the goals and principles of Australia's foreign and trade policies. It is the second such document to be issued by the Howard Government.

1.2 In their foreword to the White Paper, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Alexander Downer, and the Minister for Trade, Mr Mark Vaile, wrote that:

This White Paper continues the Government's commitment, expressed in the 1997 White Paper, *In the National Interest*, to keep the Australian Parliament and Australians informed of its approach to foreign and trade policy. Our aim is to give readers a deeper understanding of the essential contribution the Government's foreign and trade policy makes to advancing Australia's national interests. The Government recognises the importance of community understanding of Australia's foreign and trade policy.

1.3 This Report sets out to provide an overview of the White Paper's major themes and to identify areas of discussion and debate arising from it. The Report does not aim to discuss all of the White Paper's assessments comprehensively. The Committee has selected for discussion key issues which are of particular importance to current debates on the document and to Australia's current foreign policy concerns. One major element addressed by the Committee is the ongoing challenge for Australia in balancing its relations in the Asia-Pacific region with its alliance relationship with the United States.

1.4 Before embarking on its analysis of the White Paper's content, the Committee sees merit in a brief consideration of

- a) the role and function of the White Paper; and
- b) the concept of 'national interest' which informs the White Paper.

The role of a White Paper

1.5 The function of white papers in the communication of governments' policies has evolved and diversified over time. A White Paper can vary from a thirty page summary statement of a government's policy position to three hundred pages of detailed and well argued policy designed to activate a government agenda and provide

1 In preparing its report the Committee has drawn extensively on a paper prepared for the Committee by Dr Frank Frost (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group, Department of the Parliamentary Library).

a comprehensive basis for future decision-making. In some cases it follows a Green Paper published to launch a consultation process.

1.6 A White Paper is usually a kind of ‘declaration of intent’ in which the government commits itself to a clear policy and actions that go with it. Announcing the commissioning of the 2003 White Paper, the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Hon Alexander Downer MP) said he considered the 1997 Paper to have been a ‘landmark document’, describing it as:

... a blueprint for the conduct of Australian foreign and trade policy.²

1.7 The 2003 foreign and trade policy White Paper was commissioned to build upon the foundations of the 1997 White Paper in a way which took into account certain dramatic changes in the international environment. Its task was described by the government in the following terms:

The central purpose of the White Paper will be to ascertain how Australia can best use its considerable credentials and attributes to advance its national interests in an increasingly globalised and fluid international environment. *Advancing the National Interest* will examine the key international security, economic and political challenges facing Australia, including, although not exclusively:

- What are the implications of September 11 for the international and regional security environment and what will the impact be on Australia?
- How can Australia best advance its economic interests in an environment of deepening globalisation?
- How can Australia maximise the benefits from the new WTO round of global trade negotiations and from the increased international interest in free trade agreements?
- What is the balance and interplay between Australia's relations with Asia and our broader international interests?
- What are the main challenges and opportunities for Australia in the Asia-Pacific region?
- How can Australia make best use of coalitions of likeminded countries to advance its interests on key economic and security issues?
- Where do Australia's interests lie in the United Nations system and how can these best be advanced?³

2 Hon Alexander Downer MP (Minister for Foreign Affairs), *Speech at the National Press Club*, Canberra, 7 May 2002, available at:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2002/020507_fa_whitepaper.html

3 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/ani/index2.html>

1.8 The Committee examines the White Paper's handling of many of these key questions throughout this Report. As well, it sought the views of witnesses about the overall effectiveness of the White Paper *as a white paper*—that is, as a document intended to explain government policy, to make its policy intentions clear and to say what actions the government would be taking to achieve those policy ends. The views received were quite varied.

Foreign policy white papers are complex beasts. They are not like defence white papers. In defence white papers you have a very natural focus; that is, billions of dollars a year that need to be spent. The natural focus of defence white papers is to work out how that money should be distributed. Foreign policy white papers are harder to focus, but it does seem to me that a more effective form of white paper would be one that identified a series—perhaps four or five—of long-term, major, national foreign policy objectives, described how resources were going to be devoted to achieving those objectives and set out the objectives in terms against which the effort can be measured in future years. Although, naturally, a lot of foreign policy does need to be reactive and probably should be reactive, I do think it is possible to identify four or five major priorities which a document like this could have identified and against which resources could have been allocated and objectives set.⁴

1.9 The identification of 'four or five major priorities' in a foreign policy White Paper is intuitively appealing. One of the officials involved in drafting the White Paper told the Committee that the Paper did indeed identify enduring priorities, noting, however, that these were quite numerous, and that their conscientious pursuit needed to be tempered by responsiveness to opportunities that might arise elsewhere.

Given the experience with defence white papers, I could understand why members of the community think that it would be really nice to have a foreign and trade policy white paper that sets out those major priorities neatly and then allocates resources and describes how you achieve them.

But the problem... is that foreign and trade policies just are not like that. They are unpredictable. Of course, there are certain things that you can point to that are of enduring importance, but there is still a high degree of unpredictability in the foreign and trade policy agenda. That is partly because they are opportunistic... So that entails the government being fairly nimble. If you suddenly have a proposal for a major free trade agreement in an important market that wasn't on the agenda a year ago, you don't look at it and say, 'We cannot do that. That wasn't one of the four or five priorities.' You look at it on a pragmatic basis, see whether it is worth the allocation of resources and pursue it.

...

4 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2003, p. 23 (White)

The major objectives of the government at the moment are spelt out clearly in each chapter... The war against terrorism and dealing with the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are two key security objectives, and I think that comes through very clearly in the chapter on security.

The chapter which gives a description of trade policy emphasises the importance of multilateral liberalisation through the World Trade Organisation. That obviously remains a key objective of the government: the successful conclusion of the Doha round and the maintenance of the Cairns Group as a vehicle to achieve that. Also... the government is keen to investigate bilateral and regional avenues to trade liberalisation, and of those the US FTA is the most important. It is very clearly stated that those are key objectives of the government, using the WTO and FTAs where appropriate to achieve trade liberalisation.

You then get down to the geographical chapters. That becomes much more difficult. What are the government's key priorities in Asia? One answer, and it is a bit of a smart answer, is simply to say that we have extensive interests in Asia and we want to pursue those... I could be arbitrary and say that building an enduring relationship with Indonesia after the difficult times we have gone through is a key government objective. And I could look at our major partners in Asia and make a similar objective for each of them. But the list is growing as I speak... But I am not ducking the question when I say that, by definition, the range of major policies that you pursue to advance your foreign and trade relations gets pretty large, and quite a few of those can be of great significance.⁵

1.10 Dr Alan Dupont, a Senior Fellow in Strategic and Defence Studies at the Australian National University, was generally commendatory of the 2003 White Paper. What was missing, in his view, was a broader 'overarching document where the foreign affairs white paper and the defence white paper can be seen to fit'.⁶

I think this white paper is a lot better than its predecessor, which I found excessively optimistic and really did not anticipate a lot of the changes in our security environment. In terms of the influences that would shape our foreign policy, I think this is a much more realistic document. It is more coherent and picks up on a lot of the seminal changes that we have seen over the last few years... It underlines some of the measures the government has put in place to address some of these challenges.

The irony, from my point of view, is that I do not think the government has sold itself very well here... Some of the most important and positive responses have been pretty much neglected, and that is surprising because normally it is the other way around. What is surprising is that the government has not done more to sell its message, not only in Australia but within the region, about what it is doing.

5 *Committee Hansard*, 21 August 2003, pp. 71–74 (DFAT)

6 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2003, p. 40 (Dupont)

...

We still lack in this country an overarching whole-of-government approach to foreign policy, trade and national security. This is a sectoral paper... There is a sense in which this is only part of the story. If you really want to understand the underpinnings of Australian foreign policy and trade policy, there is a document that is missing here, and I think we need to re-address this in the future.⁷

1.11 For another witness, Mr Rawdon Dalrymple, the foreign and trade policy objectives were discernible in the White Paper more by ‘reading between the lines’:

I think... one can infer that there are objectives in the minds of the authors or of those who put the paper out. One of them is quite clearly to sustain into the indefinite future Australia’s membership and good standing in the west and the closeness of Australia’s relationship with the United States. That is an objective which I suppose the authors would say is subsumed under or is directly related to Australia’s national interest.

It seems to me you are left with the impression after reading this document... that advancing Australia’s interest really means making Australia more secure by linking it more and more tightly with the United States and the other countries with which we have principal historical, cultural and other similarities and ties.⁸

1.12 The Committee acknowledges the merits in each of the views outlined above. Notwithstanding the assessment by one academic that the White Paper ‘looks like a rough draft crafted from ministerial press releases’⁹, the government clearly considers that it has fulfilled its role of informing the public about the nature and direction of Australia’s international preferences, engagements and priorities.

What the government has tried to do in this white paper is not so much set in stone every single policy on every single issue—because you cannot do that; it changes—but it has tried to provide a framework so that the wider community would be able to place what the government was doing in the context of broader interests... I cannot say what we have achieved but I can say what we tried to achieve, which was essentially at a time of great interest and questioning about foreign and trade policy to provide the community with a reference, with a framework, so that they could better understand the policies the government was pursuing.¹⁰

1.13 The Committee is not satisfied, however, that the ‘framework’ and ‘reference’ offered by the White Paper is adequate to the task of conveying effectively to the Australian public the complexity and the challenges that confront our nation,

7 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2003, pp. 39–40 (Dupont)

8 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2003, pp. 55–56 (Dalrymple)

9 Makinda, S M, ‘The Howard Government and the United Nations’, (Symposium Paper, School of Economics and Political Science, Sydney University, April 2003).

10 *Committee Hansard*, 21 August 2003, p. 67 (DFAT)

especially in the medium to long term. Certainly there is a sense of its being hastily refashioned—a kind of policy bivouac erected on the no-man’s-land of terrorism, seeking to reassure the home front, and sending out bold signals about our economic potency. In this respect, the Committee has some sympathy with the following comments, put by a former Foreign Affairs Departmental head (Richard Woolcott, AC), about the relationship of words to actions.

The stated objectives are often exemplary, and the issue really is to what extent those objectives are achieved. I have always felt that in foreign and trade policy you really have to judge not by the stated objectives, which are always said to be sound and in the national interest, but by the actual outcomes. And while the objectives are often exemplary the outcomes are often not as they had been hoped for... I believe that since I retired from the Public Service there has been much more emphasis by government on what I would call news management or an attempt to influence public opinion. That is understandable because the government wants to explain its policies. While always in favour of truthful briefings, and having done a great deal of it myself for governments of both political persuasions, I feel that to some extent this process has fallen into the hands of what are called spin doctors. Their purpose is not to brief the public through the media objectively about what the real agenda is but rather to manage the news in such a way that that agenda is supported.¹¹

1.14 The Committee explored the charge of ‘spin doctoring’ with the witness appearing on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Obviously, the government wants to make a good, convincing, compelling presentation of its foreign and trade policy achievements. There is a genuinely good story to tell. But it is not strange that the government wants to put that in the best possible way to ensure that the wider public is aware that the national interests are being resolutely advanced across the board. I don’t think you get very far by calling that spin treatment.¹²

1.15 For the Committee, to put a foreign policy ‘in the best possible way’ is to present it in a context drawn from a sound analysis of the international environment, and which also identifies the sorts of constraints within which foreign policy is framed. To have provided a somewhat more sophisticated account of the state of the world, and to have at least noted the range and depth of the real dilemmas, constraints and challenges thrown up by that assessment, need not have added greatly to the length of the White Paper. It would have added much to its usefulness and integrity. In particular, it would have assisted its readers towards a better and more nuanced appreciation of the largely unfamiliar terrain of foreign and trade policy—which was, after all, one of the prime purposes of the 2003 White Paper.

11 Transcript of private briefing by Mr Richard Woolcott, AC, 21 August 2003, pp. 3–4.

12 *Committee Hansard*, 21 August 2003, p. 77 (DFAT)

The ‘national interest’

The national interest does not exist in the abstract. It reflects a judgement made at any time in the light of conflicting sectoral interests.¹³

1.16 The titles of both the 1997 White paper *In the National Interest*, and the 2003 Paper *Advancing the National Interest* draw conspicuous attention to the concept of national interest—a ‘slippery concept that acts as an anchor to all foreign policy making and foreign policy analysis.’¹⁴

The title of the second white paper was chosen quite deliberately with a reference to the first. The first was entitled *In the national interest*. The second white paper is called *Advancing the national interest*. I think what the government wanted to underline by that title was that the enduring basis of government policy was the pursuit of the national interest. However, as *Advancing the national interest* makes clear, there had been significant changes in the international environment and obviously that had led to some policy changes. Nevertheless, the policies are still designed to pursue the national interest.¹⁵

1.17 The 1997 Paper states that a ‘clear sense of the national interest, an understanding of what is important for Australians, and confidence in the capacity of Australia to shape its future internationally define the Government’s approach to foreign and trade policy.’ It goes on to identify those interests to be ‘the security of the Australian nation and the jobs and standard of living of the Australian people’.¹⁶ The Paper also notes that: ‘National interests cannot be pursued without regard to the values of the Australian community, including its support for fundamental human rights’.¹⁷

1.18 The national interest is elaborated in the first chapter of the 1997 Paper in the following terms:

- Australia’s most important strategic and economic interests lie in the Asia Pacific. This will not change over the next fifteen years. (pp. 1, 3)
- Australia’s security interests go beyond safety from attack to the preservation of its capacity for independent decision-making. (p. 1)

13 Harris, S, *Review of Australia’s Diplomatic Representation*, (Canberra: GPS, 1986), pp. 186–7.

14 Gyngell, A & Wesley, M, *Making Australian Foreign Policy*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 26.

15 *Committee Hansard*, 21 August 2003, p. 62 (DFAT)

16 Commonwealth of Australia, *In the National Interest: Australia’s Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997), p. (iii)

17 Commonwealth of Australia *In the National Interest: Australia’s Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997), p. (iv)

- While the risk of global conflict has diminished, it is in Australia’s national interest that the proliferation of nuclear weapons be halted, that chemical and biological weapons be banned and that terrorism be contained. (p. 2)
- Non-military threats such as pandemics, illegal migration, refugee flows, environmental degradation, narcotics and transnational crime reinforce the importance of taking a broad view of security. (p. 3)
- Trade and investment will grow as a contribution to GDP. It is in Australia’s interests to invest in overseas markets, and to be attractive to foreign investment, especially in high value-added activities. International trade liberalisation is in Australia’s best interests. (pp. 4–10)

1.19 The chapter also describes ‘national values’—essentially those of a liberal democracy, including the rule of law, freedom of the press, executive accountability to parliament and a commitment to a “fair go”. Special attention is given to human rights—civil, political, economic, social and cultural—with an emphasis on ‘practical efforts’ to promote them, noting that linking human rights to trade ‘serves neither Australia’s trade nor its human rights interests’. (p. 14)

1.20 The 2003 White Paper, *Advancing the National Interest*, is more cursory in its account of the national interest, which it specifies as ‘the security and prosperity of Australia and Australians.’ (p. vii).

1.21 A somewhat more nuanced account of the national interest was made available to the Committee in a conference paper that cited a letter from a senior DFAT official, who wrote:

The national interest is a multi-dimensional concept that can be categorised broadly into:

- 1) Geopolitical or strategic interests (in relation to global and regional security)
- 2) Economic and trade interests, and
- 3) Multi-national interests in relation to Australia’s standing and responsibilities as a member of the international community. At times, and on certain issues, these interests may conflict, and the Government has adopted a pragmatic and realistic approach in prioritising the promotion of Australia’s security, prosperity and values over global ideological principles.¹⁸

1.22 The Committee believes that *Advancing the National Interest* would have benefited from the inclusion of such a formulation. Other witnesses, too, felt that the explication of Australia’s national interest in the 2003 White Paper left something to be desired.

18 Letter from DFAT official (Mr Bruce Gosper, 2002) cited in Geoff Edwards, *Our Brothers’ Keeper: The national interest and accountability for others’ well-being*, Paper presented at the International Institute for Public Ethics Biennial Conference, 4-7 October 2002, Brisbane, Australia. Available at <http://www.iipe.org/conference2002/papers/Edwards.pdf>

The [2003 paper] preserves from its predecessor a sustained focus on the idea of the national interest. I looked at this aspect of the document quite carefully. I think primarily that is a presentational point. I do not think there is, if you like, a genuine underlying analytical basis for the idea that this document is more strongly based on our national interest. There is nothing wrong with it as a presentational point—it is quite a legitimate form of presentation—but I am struck that in this document, unlike for example the defence white paper that was published in 2000, we do not see an orderly and explicit statement of those interests.¹⁹

1.23 The Committee is aware that concepts of ‘national interest’ have fuelled decades of debate in both the professional and academic discourses on foreign policy. For some, it is a profoundly unhelpful concept.

Rhetorically powerful as it may be, the concept of the national interest is ultimately contentless, a concept of such protean flexibility that any goals can be subsumed within it.²⁰

1.24 The Committee acknowledges the ‘protean’ dimension of the concept of national interest, and agrees that it can encapsulate any number of goals. But this does not mean that it has no value as a way of framing a country’s approach to its foreign policy. The content may change over time, but the ‘national interest’ can be a useful normative reference point. Whether the 2003 White Paper applies the concept usefully is a separate question.

1.25 The Committee is concerned that, despite the prominent rhetorical and conceptual role assigned to ‘national interest’, the White Paper’s authors clearly felt under no obligation to acknowledge, let alone try and wrestle with, the complexities and problems that are intrinsic to the definition and application of the term. This is a significant shortcoming. As well, there is no attempt to explain how ‘national interest’ might relate to, or integrate with, ‘global interest’, even though globalisation is a key theme of the Paper.

1.26 In wrestling with the concept of ‘national interest’ at a theoretical level, the Committee found Friedrich Kratochwil’s discussion in the Winter 1982 edition of the journal *International Organization* to be particularly helpful. This account explored the scholarly, practical and historical dimensions of appeals to national interest. Kratochwil offered a way of thinking about national interest which highlighted the following points:

- To dismiss the concept of ‘national interest’ as a meaningless phrase or at best an indication of subjective preferences seems to exclude the possibility of the term’s having ‘an intersubjective content’. It also fails to acknowledge the

19 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2003, pp. 21–22 (White)

20 Reus-Smit, C, *Lost at sea: Australia in the turbulence of world politics*, (Working Paper 2002/4, Department of International Relations, RSPAS, Australian National University, Canberra, July 2002), p. 29.

‘political reality for which the term stands’. The concept may be ‘analytically fuzzy’ but ‘it is important and used by decision makers’.

- The conventional attempts to define the meaning of national interest wrongly assume that it is a *descriptive* term to which a common dimension or property can be attributed. This is not helpful for terms which are used ‘in a normative fashion for ... justifying action. Here meaning cannot be reduced to a commonality; rather, it is disclosed by the usage of the term in specific contexts, satisfying certain criteria.’
- To argue on the grounds of national interest ‘requires some giving of reasons’ which must be able to be ‘marshalled to support this claim when challenged.’ This means going beyond mere preferences to ‘argue on the basis of intersubjective grounds that can be adduced for backing a claim.’ The validity of the reasons depends on ‘rules of inference and the existence of evidence’. Reasons may compete, so there must be criteria for weighing national interest claims. Values must be specified, and the consequences assessed. But the ‘invocation even of widely shared values does not by itself legitimize a particular policy.’²¹

1.27 The Committee’s approach to ‘national interest’ is congruent with that advocated by Kratochwil. Viewed in this way, the 2003 White Paper does not measure up to the Committee’s expectations in terms of providing its readers with a more explicit or coherent account of Australia’s ‘national interest’. The national interest is stated both simply and broadly—‘security’ and ‘prosperity’. These goals are hardly unique to Australia, and could be invoked by the governments of any country, whether democratic or authoritarian, to arrive at completely contrary policy positions.

1.28 For the Committee, the ‘national interest’ is a perfectly proper invocation to be made in a White Paper. But such an invocation risks being little more than vacuous ethical posturing if it is not situated within a conceptual framework that recognises, and helps citizens to think about, the genuine ethical dilemmas that attach to foreign policy development.

What happens... when the new world politics places liberal constraints on sovereignty, creates one global free market, erodes an ecosystem that defies national boundaries, domesticates warfare, socialises power, and transfers authority to international institutions? ... [It] is imperative that governments find new ways to think about, and act upon, the ethical foundations of national policy, as each of these new political phenomena raise profound moral dilemmas. Is there still a right of intervention, and why? What responsibilities do one people have for the economic hardships of another in a world of economic globalisation? What are the ethical foundations of economic adjustment programs, internationally or domestically? Do we have obligations to peoples displaced by the domestication of violence, and

21 Kratochwil, F, ‘On the notion of “interest” in international relations’ in *International Organisation*, Winter 1982 (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Winter 1982, vol. 36, No.1), pp. 1–30.

what is the nature of these obligations? What constitutes a just war when states fight terrorists? How does one decide a state's fair share of the burdens of the global ecological collapse?²²

1.29 The 2003 White Paper is strong on calls for Australia to be a 'realist', a 'pragmatist', in its international engagements. It articulates the national interest in ways consistent with what Minister Downer referred to as 'an important reminder that Australian foreign policy must not be based on dreamy idealism.'²³ The Committee agrees that 'dreamy idealism' is no basis for foreign policy. But neither is 'pragmatism' if it is deployed to mask a lack of direction.

1.30 In the Committee's view, a foreign policy should certainly be realistic; but it should not embrace a reductionist realism relying on a simplistic diagnosis of forces shaping the world. For the Committee, being realistic necessarily involves recognising as real the challenges and ethical dilemmas posed in the paragraph above. The 2003 White Paper falls well short of this requirement.

1.31 In the Committee's view, the 2003 White Paper could have provided a more thorough-going explication of the 'national interest', including reasons to justify the inclusion of certain matters and the omission of others in the way the national interest was framed. This would have also better served the White Paper's proclaimed intent of engaging and informing the Australian public about the government's foreign and trade policy.

22 Reus-Smit, C, *Lost at sea: Australia in the turbulence of world politics*, (Working Paper 2002/4, Department of International Relations, RSPAS, Australian National University, Canberra, July 2002), p. 29.

23 Hon Alexander Downer MP (Minister for Foreign Affairs), delivering the Inaugural Hasluck Asia Oration, *The Legacy of Australia's Close Engagement with Asia*, Murdoch University, 9 August 2000, available at: http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/2000/000809_isolate.html

