

Defence is looking to shift its focus to protecting the oil and gas fields off north-west Australia

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MORE of Australia's warships, strike fighters and defence personnel could be shifted to Australia's north-west under a force posture review announced by Defence Minister Stephen Smith today.

As offshore oil and gas operations worth billions of dollars in Australia's remote north-west continue to develop, Mr Smith announced a review led by former Defence department secretaries Allan Hawke and Ric Smith that will shift Australia's strategic focus in the Asia-Pacific region.

The review will feed into the next defence white paper due in 2014, and will complement a United States global force posture review, which is already underway.

Mr Smith rejected suggestions the review was being conducted with one eye on China, arguing Australia had a strong bilateral relationship with the Asian superpower dating back to the 1970s.

Mr Smith said the protection of energy infrastructure, and the question of energy security, were becoming important domestic issues for Australia.

"The review will consider the rise of the need for energy security in the north-west of Australia, the rise of the Pacific Rim as an area of strategic importance and the need for Australia to be able to respond to humanitarian crises in the region," Mr Smith said.

"As we know, in the north-west and the north of Australia, off the coast of north-western West Australia and off the coast of the Northern Territory, we are now seeing a significant petroleum resources energy belt."

Mr Smith said the review was the first stand alone posture review for many years.

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