

Nation's military moved West in defence plan

ANDREW PROBYN and NICK BUTTERLY EXCLUSIVE, The West Australian June 22, 2011, 6:00 am

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WA is to become the front line in the defence of Australia under a review that will reposition the nation's military in response to growing fears about China and security in the Indian Ocean.

Under a so-called "force posture review" to be announced by Defence Minister Stephen Smith this morning, the Australian Defence Force will likely shift many of its warships and thousands of personnel to WA.

The West Australian understands that protecting the hundreds of billions of dollars worth of offshore oil and gas rigs on the North West Shelf and the Browse Basin will become one of Defence's top priorities as regional energy security becomes paramount.

Navy patrol boats and warships are expected to increasingly prowl the Indian Ocean north of WA to protect the scores of drilling and exploration platforms from piracy and other attacks.

The review comes as the US military considers establishing a permanent naval presence in Rockingham to counter China's emerging "blue water" capability.

Insiders believe the review could result in three new air warfare destroyers and one of the two new Australian-built landing helicopter docks being based at Garden Island's HMAS Stirling.

The Government is also considering building up to 12 submarines, many of which would likely be based at Garden Island.

The US already plans to expand its presence in WA's north, including at Exmouth's top-secret Harold E. Holt base, to increase surveillance of Chinese satellites and submarines.

The review would be the first significant restructuring of the ADF's footprint since the 1980s and would move many military assets away from traditional bases in NSW and Victoria to northern Australia, including Cairns, Scherger in far-north Queensland and Darwin.

To improve Australia's humanitarian response capacity in the Asia-Pacific, there is likely to be a renewed focus on improving remote defence outposts and building airstrips at Curtin air base and the RAAF base at Learmonth so Joint Strike Fighters can better operate, throwing a protective umbrella over the North West Shelf.

The review, to be finished in March, will form the centrepiece of the next scheduled Defence White Paper due in 2014.

At the Shangri-La Defence summit in Singapore this month, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said America was poised to increase its presence in the Asia Pacific, warning the region faced "evolving challenges".

China is soon to launch its first aircraft carrier and has suggested it has ambitions to build several more.

The carrier would give Beijing a heightened presence in the Asian sea lanes that are vital to Australia's economy.

India is also increasingly flexing its military power and expanding its navy, leading many to question New Delhi's ambitions.

The Government's \$8 billion air warfare destroyer project should deliver the first of three advanced warships in 2015.

The vessels will be able to fire missiles over long distances and could even be linked to Washington's planned missile defence umbrella.