

Refocusing the Australian Army

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Recent operations have distracted the Army from being best postured for regional engagement.¹ As the Afghanistan commitment winds down, the Army will need to overcome this neglect by shifting its primary focus to regional priorities, where geographic determinants and great power dynamics will feature. The maturation of defence infrastructure and capability projects dating back to the 1980s, coupled with capabilities entering service soon, means that the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and the Army in particular, has a strong foundation from which to refocus on engagement with regional forces, albeit with some exceptions. For instance, recent operations have demonstrated the need for sound intelligence support and a pool of language-trained and culturally-aware personnel, but regionally-oriented skills in these areas have atrophied. Beyond maintaining broad capabilities for a wide range of contingencies, the key to ensuring the Army's successful reorientation will be a regionally-focused reinvestment in intelligence, language and culture skills.

Emphasising Regional Operations

The Australian Army of 2011 has been shaped significantly by its experience in recent operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan. It also has a long history of engagement away from Australia's shores dating back to the expedition to Sudan in the nineteenth century. But the 'arc of instability', stretching from Aceh to Tonga, and the range of security concerns in the Asia-Pacific suggest that the Army must not lose focus on Australia's region as it determines future force structure, doctrine and capability priorities. This means that beyond the Afghanistan commitment, configuring the Army to meet regional security challenges must be a principal priority. Plans are well in play for significant capability enhancements, acquired with regional concerns in mind, to become operational in the near future. These enhancements also will enable the Australian Army to muster more significant responses to contingencies beyond Australia's immediate region (in East Asia or the Middle East, for instance) should the need arise. But any such calls will have to be weighed on their merits and drawn from extant capabilities designed to meet Australian and regionally-based contingencies.

¹ The region is taken to mean Southeast Asia and the island states of the Pacific.

Enduring Determinants: Geography and Great Powers

In mustering forces for a wide range of contingencies, there is plenty of scope to argue over the exact configuration required for the future Army, with a range of traditional and non-traditional security concerns expected to demand attention. But, as ever, geography and great power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region will be key determinants for Australian defence planning. In terms of great power dynamics, the rise of China as a key player in regional security affairs is the most significant recent development. Particularly noteworthy is China's growing military muscle and more assertive posturing over a number of territorial disputes including in the South China Sea. China's rise will demand circumspect and nuanced engagement in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, utilising the ADF on exercises and confidence and capacity building activities to ensure Australia's national interests in the region are addressed.

At the same time, the leadership role of the United States in Asia-Pacific security remains a key factor. To be sure, massive debt and predictions of its eclipse and demise suggest that the United States might waver in its commitment to regional security and stability. But there are enduring geo-strategic, military and economic factors that indicate that the United States will remain a regional great power. These factors include the United States' straddling of the Atlantic and Pacific, its secure and dominant position on the North American continent and its internal geographic, demographic, economic, cultural and technological dynamism.² America's strong cultural, military and economic ties with Australia also point to an enduring and compelling motivation for continued US engagement, and for Australia to stick close to its great and powerful friend. In addition, calls from across the region to remain engaged and enduring American interests at stake in the region will likely continue to underwrite Washington's role as the principal security guarantor in the Asia-Pacific region.³

These enduring regional determinants were understood by the authors of the 2009 Defence White Paper.⁴ Critics of the White Paper have argued over the funding modelling and the potentially conflicting regional ambitions of the United States and China.⁵ But such perspectives downplay the value in the ADF having a solid longer term sense of direction, even if the numbers of platforms to be purchased are rubbery. The framework set by the White

² See George Friedman, *The Next 100 Years* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

³ See Cook et al., *Power and Choice: Asian Security Futures* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, June 2010).

⁴ Michael Pezzulo, 'The Imperatives of Hard Power: the 2009 Defence White Paper', National Security College outreach presentation, 8 March 2011, <<http://nsc.anu.edu.au/outreach.php>> [Accessed 6 April 2011].

⁵ Mark Thompson, 'Defence Funding and Planning: Promises and Secrets', *Security Challenges*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 89-96.

Paper builds on Australia's Strategic Policy Report of 1997⁶ which provided the required certainty for future strategic planning. That certainty points to the Army's need for a balanced force⁷, capable of operating in the pursuit of Australia's national interests, often alongside its principal ally and regional partners. That also means being able to deploy and sustain forces on operations in the face of a spectrum of contingencies around Australia's shores and within the region.

Broad Capabilities for Security Operations

The geographic and great power determinants present the Army with a challenging array of potential options: it will be required to train and prepare for short-notice, non-traditional security contingencies such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as more robust force projection and sustainment capabilities for *in extremis* scenarios. To be sure, the Army is well to place emphasis on 'traditional' conventional warfare skills as its base line to prevent the atrophy of otherwise not fully tested capabilities essential for conventional war-fighting. These concerns have driven the Army to introduce the adaptive campaigning training cycle, with the major conventional military training activity conducted in 2010 (Exercise Hamel) being the prime example.⁸ The Army of 2011 sees little to indicate that the need for conventional military capabilities will diminish in the foreseeable future. Fortunately, many of these capabilities are directly applicable for short-term use in a wide range of domestic and off-shore non-traditional security circumstances. This is a sensible and practical approach to take to training.

Grappling with 'Amphibiousity'

For a country like Australia, which has long been concerned about the sea-air-land 'gap'⁹ to its north, the importance of the new amphibious Landing Helicopter Dock ships (LHDs) is not to be underestimated. The delivery of two LHDs can be expected to enhance significantly the ADF's ability to

⁶ Australia's Strategic Policy Report of 1997 allowed for three tasks: (1) defeating attacks on Australia, (2) defending Australia's regional interests, (3) supporting a global security environment. See Department of Defence, *Australian Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), Chapter 4.

⁷ A balanced force is taken to be a force capable of operating with its own logistic support and capable of engaging in a spectrum of operations ranging from humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations to conventional war-fighting.

⁸ Exercise Hamel was described in 2010 by the Exercise Director, Brigadier J. J. Frewen, as a "large and very demanding exercise that is designed to enhance the Army's ability to fight and operate in a modern, complex battlespace". The exercise involved included an amphibious lodgment and incorporated navy and air force components. See 'North Queensland Readies for Exercise Hamel', *Australia.to News*, 20 September 2010, <http://www.australia.to/2010/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4407:north-queensland-readies-for-exercise-hamel&catid=122:security&Itemid=169> [Accessed 6 April 2011].

⁹ The many islands make the so-called 'gap' not just a 'sea-air gap' but a sea-air-land 'gap' and, therefore, not just a challenge for maritime and air forces, but for land forces as well.

support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief-related missions, let alone a range of conventional military operations around Australia's shores and beyond. But the Australian Army is not the US Marine Corps and should be careful about letting the LHDs drive the Army's capability development.¹⁰ A rotation of company-groups aboard the LHDs seems a sensible approach at least as an interim measure. But to whole-heartedly commit the Army to rotating its infantry battalions and attached supporting elements on-board the LHDs likely would be prohibitively costly and would generate significant challenges and disruption. On the other hand, the range of non-traditional operational challenges faced in recent years point to significant benefits accruing from having a pool of amphibious-capable forces available.

Capability Enhancements Lead to Increased Options

While successive strategic documents since the 1970s have placed priority for the Army on regional engagement, the maturation of major defence projects, espoused in the white papers of the 1980s, have facilitated the Army posturing itself for a broad range of contingencies affecting Australia and the region. Some of the notable examples of these projects include the completed air bases across Australia's north, the move of the Army's 1st Brigade to Darwin, the enhanced naval (and customs) presence in the north and west, and the establishment of Border Protection Command, supported by the Army's regional force surveillance units.

The Army's ability to meet its regional engagement obligations has been aided by the cathartic experience on a number of operations, particularly in East Timor where, for instance, logistic problems arising from earlier cutbacks significantly constrained the intervention force in 1999.¹¹ Ironically, operational commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan (and, to a lesser extent, in East Timor and Solomon Islands), have constrained the Army's ability to engage constructively and more broadly with a range of Southeast Asian and Pacific nations. In addition, critical niche 'soft skills' essential for effective regional engagement have atrophied.

Intelligence, Languages and Cultural Awareness

The Army's focus on adapting to the amphibious challenge and training for conventional war fighting is appropriate given the geographic and great power realities in the region. But with engagement over regional security

¹⁰ A useful start point on the debate about development of the amphibious capability is found in Albert Palazzo et al., *Projecting Force: the Australian Army and Maritime Strategy* (Canberra: LWSC, June 2010).

¹¹ The events in East Timor provided a compelling demonstration of the utility of force that Australia could deploy and sustain off shore. This demonstration made regionally-focused defence engagement a greater imperative. For a consideration of the logistic challenges see for instance, David Horner, 'Deploying and Sustaining INTERFET in 1999', in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *Raise, Train and Sustain: Delivering Land Combat Power*, Chief of Army Military History Conference 2009 (Loftus, NSW: Australian Military History Publications, 2010).

challenges expected to feature and amphibious capabilities facilitating such engagement, the Army needs to work to ensure its engagement is not seen as insensitive and counterproductive. Key to avoiding such an outcome is to ensure that the Army's 'soft' skills, in particular its intelligence, language and cultural awareness capabilities, are attuned to regional requirements.

The Army's experience in Afghanistan has illustrated the importance of accurate and timely intelligence for effective military operations. For instance, task group commanders have spoken about the pivotal role played by "fused" intelligence—that is timely intelligence derived from a wide range of electronic, human and other sources that provides them with a high level of confidence in being able to plan in detail for and then launch successful operations that also minimise the damaging fallout of inadvertent casualties. Yet these resources, essentially the Army's highly-trained intelligence personnel and some specialist equipment, are in critically-short supply. They need to be placed centrally in the consciousness of Army force structure planners and not left aside as peripheral elements to be cobbled together in an emergency.

In Afghanistan, a critical constraint faced in engaging more effectively with and understanding the people has been the shortage of trained and trusted linguists. Undoubtedly, there is advantage in having a large number of people trained in languages and culture and available for deployment. Over the last few years, the Army has developed a capable group of linguists and quasi-anthropologists for use in Afghanistan. But few can be trained to a sufficiently high standard and those that do take a long time to develop. What is more, the skills acquired and capabilities developed are context specific. As the Army refocuses on regional security challenges, a significant challenge lies ahead in developing and fostering a pool of personnel skilled in regional languages that can be called upon at short notice.

Beyond understanding the spoken words, understanding the culture—the taboos and the preferences, the biases and preconceptions—has been fundamental to enable commanders and soldiers to discern intentions and consequences accurately and to plan meaningful responses. The range of contingencies likely to be faced in the region is best addressed by having timely and culturally-attuned intelligence that can be acted upon. Australia's response to the 'War on Terror' over the last decade has demonstrated the significance of cultural awareness, sound intelligence and language skills in responding to the challenges of violent extremists. A number of federal and state agencies are well placed to address these challenges domestically, but abroad Defence (with the Army prominent) is often the lead agency. The Army therefore needs to be better postured for such challenges.

In the meantime, the Army's pool of soldiers skilled in regional languages and cultural understanding has atrophied. To be sure, military exercises and

exchange programs have been maintained with regional partners in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. But they have been on a reduced footing and the diminished level of engagement and the distraction of pressing commitments elsewhere in recent years has been noticed by our regional partners. As Australia's mission in Afghanistan approaches completion, there is a need to reinvest in skills to enable closer and more effective engagement in Australia's region. Indeed, relative to the 'big-ticket' items, the investment required is modest, yet with potentially exponential positive consequences.

The Thai Example

Some may say that the Army can afford to de-emphasise having a pool of culturally-attuned linguists and intelligence specialists until a clear requirement emerges. But there is compelling evidence to the contrary suggesting that these specialists are a pivotal component of Defence's regional engagement and cooperation program and that program, over the longer term, can pay significant and unexpected dividends. For example, in early September 1999, when Australia was looking around for a regional partner to contribute forces and leadership to the international stabilisation force in East Timor, assistance came from an unexpected corner. Thailand was the first country in ASEAN to agree to contribute forces and also provided the deputy force commander (and currently Thailand's Chief of the Defence Forces), General Songkitti Jaggabatarata. The agreement came after decades of engagement with the Royal Thai Armed Forces and followed shortly after the bilateral Exercise Chapel Gold between elements of the 2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR) and the Royal Thai Army's Ready Deployment Force. Alongside the contingent was a team of Australian Army linguists who helped the Australian commander better understand and appropriately respond to the unique cultural dynamics faced there. As it turned out, both units subsequently deployed to East Timor a couple of months later. In effect, Thailand acted in response to Australia's request for support in recognition of Australia's legitimate and genuine commitment to regional security and stability over many years.

In recent years, however, some Southeast Asian military officials have privately questioned the level of the Australian Army's interest and commitment to the region. Such lessons, therefore, need to be taken to heart as the Army and the wider ADF refocus on Australia's immediate region. Increased military engagement with Australia's great neighbour, Indonesia, should be a priority. Good relations with countries like Indonesia and institutional capacity building should not be left to chance. For healthy, mutually respectful and constructive relations, ongoing investment is required.

Engage in Non-threatening Multilateral Activities

As the Army looks to reposition for the future, the dividends of investment in regional and culturally-sensitive engagement, should be apparent. In Southeast Asia, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and related non-traditional security issues have become a touchstone—providing a non-threatening context for otherwise wary neighbours to collaborate militarily. This collaboration has accelerated since the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Working within this non-threatening and non-traditional security domain has helped to build confidence and, in turn, enhance regional stability and security. In one instance, the United States and Thailand have turned what was, during the Cold War, a conventional bilateral military exercise, Cobra Gold, into a multilateral exercise attuned to the regional dynamics and concerns over non-traditional security priorities. Some of Australia's key security partners in the Asia-Pacific, including countries like Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Indonesia, are now active participants.

As Australia looks to refocus on its region, greater engagement in multilateral confidence building activities like Cobra Gold would demonstrate Australia's re-burnished regional security credentials, notably alongside our principal ally, the United States. Similarly, regional partners, particularly countries like Indonesia, should be actively encouraged to participate alongside the Army on exercises in Australia. Australia's interests would be served by bolstering multi-lateral regional co-operation while supporting the nation's principal ally's engagement efforts in the Southeast Asian region.

Niche Areas for Investment

The broad range of capabilities maintained by the Army is essential in the face of the spectrum of traditional and non-traditional security threats that could emerge in the foreseeable future. But for the Army to be best postured to engage regionally, some adjustments are required. First, greater resources will need to be committed to engaging actively in the region's multilateral exercises and inviting regional participation in exercises based in Australia. Second, key schools will require better resourcing. These schools include the Defence International Training Centre (where foreign students go to learn about working with the ADF), the Defence School of Languages and the Defence Intelligence Training Centre. Third, recognising the challenge in fostering these capabilities, the Army Reserve should be shaped to assist in fostering a pool of talented linguistically and culturally-savvy advisors for plausible regional contingencies—in a similar manner to the Army's pool of specialist medical staff.

Conclusion

The maturation of numerous defence projects leaves the Army better placed to engage constructively and actively in the region with a firm base in

Australia's north and more robust capabilities at its disposal. Moreover, with budgetary pressures likely to impinge on US capability and US will to remain engaged in Australia's near north (particularly in Southeast Asia), Australia's participation in multilateral regional activities aimed at enhancing regional stability like Cobra Gold has become all the more valuable. Such regional activities, notably including Australia's bigger neighbour Indonesia, should become a central part of the Army's thinking. Defence and Army planners and strategists need to take a proactive stance to ensure that Australia's Army has an increased leavening effect on regional security and stability. Having access to a range of enhanced ADF capabilities, including the amphibious platforms, means the Army is now better placed to do so. A proactive stance can help to bolster the related regional stability support mechanisms linked with bodies such as ASEAN and the Five Power Defence Arrangements as they seek to address both traditional and non-traditional security concerns. In this context, culturally-attuned, linguistically-prepared and well-informed soldiers have the potential to be a force for good, bolstering the region's security and stability, and in so doing protecting Australia's national interests.

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