

Capability Planning and the Future of the Australian Army

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In many ways the Australian Army finds itself pulled in different directions—between the operations it wants to be able to do, and those that it is actually most likely to be called upon to do.

The Army has been continuously deployed to the Middle East and Central Asia for the last decade, where Special Forces and protected mobility patrols supported by combat engineers and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) elements have been the order of the day. But at the same time, the biggest investments in equipment include armed reconnaissance helicopters, armour, amphibious lift and artillery. The Australian Army has not deployed artillery or armour since leaving Vietnam in 1972 and the sealift that has moved its major offshore deployments since then has not required the unique capabilities of amphibious ships as port facilities have always been available.

Like the rest of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), the force structure of the Army is dictated to a large extent by scenarios that are used to derive military strategies from top-level strategic guidance. However, unlike the rest of the ADF, the Army is routinely called upon to perform roles that do not make use of the resulting force elements.

The Air Force can deploy fast jets ostensibly purchased for White Paper-mandated Defence of Australia duties to distant theatres to conduct strike missions; as it did in Iraq in 2003. Similarly, the Navy can deploy its surface vessels to the Persian Gulf in support of coalition activities or in anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa, despite their nominal *raison d'être* being sea control and protection of sea lines of communication in a primary operating area contiguous with the Australian mainland. But when the Army has deployed for recent operations, it has left most of its sophisticated hardware at home.

What the Army Wants

An explanation for Army's predilections can be found in a study of the motivations of the different arms of the military. A classic RAND Corporation

study found that each service has its own values and aspirations, and that these vary markedly.¹ Air Forces have long been drawn to high technology while navies value the independent command of ships at sea. As a result, navies will fiercely defend the number of hulls in their orders of battle. Air Forces are less concerned with quantity than quality—to the point where western air forces have steadily shrunk in size for at least forty years while individual platform capabilities (and costs) have increased dramatically.

Armies are even less concerned with numbers, being accustomed to expanding and contracting, sometimes to an extraordinary degree, with the circumstances of the nation. Instead, armies value the professional mastery of combined arms and manoeuvre. What Monash invented on the Western Front in the First World War as a matter of necessity when faced with a bloody stalemate, the modern Army now sees as almost an end in itself. This manifests itself in a desire to maintain infantry, armour, artillery and other specialties. The mere fact of not having deployed those capabilities in over a generation makes little difference to the institutional imperatives.

The Australian Army's thinking has been spelled out in a series of doctrinal pieces. In 2005, the Army launched its Hardened and Networked Army (HNA) program, which reflected the battlegroup² concept and which aimed to re-equip the force with better firepower, armoured mobility and networked communications. The HNA program aims to structure and equip the Army so it can “fight in complex terrain and contribute to coalition operations of up to medium intensity”.³

More recently, Army has published a conceptual framework for the force development of the Australian Army: ‘Adaptive Campaigning—future land operating concept’.⁴ Seemingly heavily influenced by its recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it identifies several trends in modern warfare:

- retreat [by adversaries] into complex terrain;
- disaggregation of the battlespace;
- readily transferrable highly lethal weapons;

¹ Carl H. Builder, *The Army in the Strategic Planning Process: Who Shall Bell the Cat?*, RAND Report R-3513-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, April 1987). The thesis was expanded upon in Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989).

² While on paper the Australian Army appears in a regimental structure, it is not envisaged that Australian Army formations will deploy as regiments. Instead, the concept is that elements of various combat and combat support units will be tailored into reconfigurable combined-arms ‘battlegroups’, commanded by battalion/regiment level headquarters, as mission needs dictate.

³ Department of Defence, *The Hardened and Networked Army*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2005, <http://www.defence.gov.au/update2005/defence_update_factsheet.pdf> [Accessed 14 May 2011].

⁴ Australian Army, *Adaptive Campaigning: Army's Future Land Operating Concept* (Canberra: Department of Defence, September 2009).

- less decisive combat operations; and
- battlefields that are more often urban settings than open terrain.

While the HNA and Adaptive Campaigning conceptual frameworks are at least partly consistent, it seems fair to observe that HNA applies primarily to the upper end of the spectrum of modern conflict described in the more recent document.

The Defence White Paper

Army's views have been reflected explicitly in successive Defence White Papers. For example, the 2009 White Paper identifies the following requirement for the land force:

Land combat, combat support and combat service support forces (such as infantry, armour, artillery, combat engineers, and aviation), which are able to operate as combined-arms teams and undertake combat in our littoral environment and territory, are necessary to secure offshore territories and facilities, defeat incursions onto Australian territory and potentially deny adversaries access to staging bases from which they could attack us. They are also required to undertake amphibious manoeuvre, and stabilisation and reconstruction operations in our immediate neighbourhood...⁵

In reiterating the combined arms combat capability of the Army, successive White Papers have reflected the prevailing force structures, with a 'replace like for like' approach being the norm to equipment procurement.

White Papers and Army doctrine are the theory. In practice, Australian governments have used the Army in quite different ways, in peacekeeping and stabilisation operations in the near neighbourhood, and further afield as a contribution to coalition land operations.

The local operations are best suited to light infantry and there is little or no requirement for heavy equipment and firepower. There has been constant demand since the UNIFET deployment in Timor Leste in 1999. But since the initial 6000 strong INTERFET deployment was scaled back, the Army has had suitable units to sustain these operations. And Reserve units have proven themselves quite capable of performing stabilisation operations in Timor Leste and the Solomon Islands when required.

The Australian Government has repeatedly shown its willingness to participate in coalition operations, either under United Nations auspices, or directly in support of its American ally. This has seen the Australian Army participating in hazardous operations in Iraq and (especially) Afghanistan. These operations have stretched the Army, not due the numbers deployed—

⁵ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, May 2009), para 8.20.

Australia's deployments are a smaller percentage of the overall force than other allied nations—but due to the requirement for a number of niche skills. The impact has been especially high on combat engineers and Special Forces, and some personnel have been rotated in and out of operations six times or more. Careful management of these capabilities has been required. And there is no gainsaying that these operations are dangerous, as casualty figures attest.

But there are limits to how dangerous a scenario the present government is prepared to countenance. In one of the only exclusions in the entire document (the other being a nuclear submarine), the 2009 Defence White Paper also describes what the government does *not* want from its land forces:

The government has decided that it is not a principal task for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to be generally prepared to deploy to the Middle East, or regions such as Central and South Asia or Africa, in circumstances where it has to engage in ground operations against heavily armed adversaries located in crowded urban environments. This entails a requirement to engage in high-intensity close combat which brings with it the risk of an unsustainable level of casualties for an army the size of Australia's.⁶

This 'no Fallujahs' statement may be, at least in part, a political 'product differentiation' between the Labor Government and its predecessor (which was incumbent when HNA was developed and was perhaps more sympathetic to the idea of participating in high-intensity coalition operations), and it does pose some questions for the residual HNA projects still working their way through the acquisition system. But while the government was prepared to make a rhetorical point, it does not appear to have prevailed upon Army to wind back any of the initiatives in train. In fact, the White Paper explicitly states that "no major change to the size and structure of the Army is required".⁷

Force Development

It's worth noting that the Afghanistan deployments have shown up some weaknesses in the long-term force development process. While it is not surprising that new operational environments have found existing equipment wanting in some respects, it *is* surprising that the enhanced force protection measures put in place to remedy the problems only occurred after Ministerial intervention.

In July 2009, following a visit to Afghanistan, where he would have learned at first hand of complaints over shortfalls and the quality of their equipment, and concerned at the growing number of ADF servicemen killed and injured from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and indiscriminate rocket and

⁶ Ibid., para 7.23.

⁷ Ibid., para 9.28.

other attacks, the then Minister for Defence, Senator John Faulkner, commissioned a review of force protection measures available for Australian combat personnel. Conducted at the most senior levels of Defence, the review included discussions with troops in theatre about their force protection needs and an assessment of the effectiveness of previous and current force protection initiatives.

The result was \$1.6 billion worth of initiatives to improve the situation, including force protection, communications, mobility and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Being developed and deployed under rapid-acquisition processes, these have usually been successful in providing deployed forces with valuable capability, but have been very much on a 'catch-up' basis as threats have evolved, in contrast to the forward planning of the replacement of 'core' capabilities such as artillery.

Down to the Sea in Ships

Most of the time, the difference between Army's broader aspirations and the tasks it is actually called upon to perform is relatively harmless. (Provided one puts aside the question of whether taxpayer's money is being expended in an optimal fashion—but the Army is not unique in that regard.) The opportunity cost to other Army operations of maintaining armour and artillery has not resulted in Army failing to meet the tasking that government has levied on it and any stresses have proven to be manageable.

However, Army will soon be required to develop an amphibious capability scaled to Navy's two 27,000 tonne LHD amphibious ships currently on order. A great deal of effort will be expended in working up this capability, not just by Army, but by all of the services. To see why, it is necessary to look at how the LHDs fit into the broader ADF vision. It isn't too big a stretch to say that a sizable chunk of the ADF's capability would be required in to conduct a major amphibious operation:

... if we were deploying on an operation with [LHDs] delivering the major land force component, we would create very much a layered defence around the ships. Obviously, they would be accompanied at the surface by other major surface units—air warfare destroyers or frigates with SM2 air warfare missiles, depending on the time frame. Underneath, there would obviously be submarines picketing the route, clearing choke points or clearing the route for them. Above, if required, there would be the combat air patrol with the fighter of the day—AEWC and so forth. We will create a bubble around this to move it through because it is going to be a precious cargo. On top of that there will be space assets to increase our situational awareness and any other intelligence we can glean about where we are going. We will put the best defence around these that we can. The vessel

will have some point defence capability against missiles that might come at it.⁸

That is the sort of planning underpinning the expenditure of over \$100 billion to realise the 2009 White Paper's *Force 2030*. An air of unreality thus permeates the entire exercise, and runs the risk of consuming resources that could be better directed to bolstering the depth of the capabilities that are in frequent demand. Being the service most committed in current operations, Army will feel these pressures more than most. It will need to train a battalion group (or more) as a Marine force, although it is not yet clear exactly how the amphibious capability will manifest itself in Army's structure.

Scenario-based Planning

The scenario underpinning the amphibious capability is described in the 2009 White Paper. It describes the ADF landing land forces in a pre-emptive occupation of territory in a military contingency. The reasoning is that Australian forces may be required to seize and hold a base that could otherwise be used as a staging point by another power. Being able to move a sizeable group quickly means that the ability of an adversary to intervene is much reduced.

The worst-case scenario would involve Australian forces being deployed into a strategically important (and thus potentially contested) area to secure the area against the lodging of adversary elements. In this circumstance, the ADF could subsequently be required to repel persistent attempts to dislodge the ensconced land elements and/or attack the vessels lying offshore. In such high stakes contingencies, the possibility that an adversary could attempt to intervene greatly complicates operational planning and force protection takes on a much higher priority. Seeing off air, surface and submarine threats, and securing supply lines for logistics support quickly ramps up the number and sophistication of force elements needing to be involved—hence the shopping list described above.

It could reasonably be argued that this scenario is stretching the bounds of credibility and common sense. Indeed, it is difficult to see why any power would opt to restrict itself to posing us a problem that has as its solution a battalion group of the Australian Army deployed at one or two locations on foreign shores. It stretches credulity to imagine Australia denying *all* of the potential staging points that might attract the attention of even a middle power, or even of providing reasonable levels of defence for more than a small number of deployments. (The 'island hopping' model of the Second World War comes to mind—the advancing power can pick the time and

⁸ Then Head of the Capability Group Lt General David Hurley at: *Review of Defence Annual Report 2003–04*, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Defence Subcommittee, Official Committee Hansard, 11 March 2005, <<http://www.apf.gov.au/hansard/joint/commtee/J8138.pdf>> [Accessed 14 May 2011], p. 28.

place of its assaults, and can opt to leave defending garrisoned forces *in situ* while manoeuvring elsewhere.)

Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to use scenarios to think about Army capabilities. Not all force development decisions can be made on the basis of experience in extant operations—that would run the risk of ‘planning for the last war’. The question thus becomes: other than a continuation of the peacekeeping/stabilisation operations and coalition contributions we have seen in the last few years, what else could the Australian Army reasonably be called upon to do?

The Australian Army is small by regional standards. As well, the economic advantage that Australia has had compared to other South East Asian countries since the Second World War is being rapidly eroded, with the result that the level of sophistication of equipment (and professionalism in many cases) of regional armies is improving steadily. The Australian Army therefore cannot be expected to fight land campaigns of any size in the region. More realistically, the sorts of combat operations that could be realistically countenanced are

- further peacekeeping and stabilisation operations;
- service assisted or protected evacuations of civilian populations and/or Australian nationals and other expatriates in the case of breakdown of civil order in a regional country, either with or without the help of local military or civilian authorities; and
- seizing and holding an air or maritime entry point for other force elements in an unopposed or lightly opposed environment in conjunction with either of the above two aims.

It is around these sorts of scenarios that Army’s force structures should be developed. Careful analysis will allow the testing of outstanding questions such as the future of Army’s parachute capability. Under the Extended Land Force expansion of two additional battalions, the current parachute battalion (3 RAR) will remain a light infantry battalion with a parachute capability and a further mechanised infantry battalion and a motorised infantry battalion will be raised. The parachute capability is subject to further review and it remains to be seen if the parachute role will remain in 3 RAR or transition to special operations units only, which would result in a smaller number of parachute deployable troops.

Ideally, Defence will advise the government of the size and capability of alternative parachute-capable structures required to execute credible scenarios of the sorts described above. They will then choose the cost/capability point that best fits their economic constraints and strategic outlook.

Conclusions

Military capabilities are a tool of government that are raised so that the government has military options it can employ towards policy objectives. Left to their own devices, however, the military has a tendency to plan and prepare for scenarios that the government would not necessarily come to of its own accord.

But the Australian Army has a real job to do, and given the enduring fragility of some neighbouring states and continuing unrest in the Middle East and beyond, it may well be required to continue on live operations for some time to come. It does not need to have too much effort diverted to the distractions that the military planning process is wont to throw up. The fact that the Minister and not the ADF had to instigate urgent force protection measures for deployed Army units should flag the need for more focus on the job at hand.

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