

On Military Grammar: The Australian Army beyond Afghanistan

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This analysis of the future of the Australian Army takes as its rationale the proposition advanced by the military scholar Peter Paret, that the most important problem facing armed forces is never equipment, weapons acquisition or capability development, but the intellectual mastery of current and future military concepts.¹ In terms of intellectual mastery, the Australian Army—like its peers in the United States and Britain—has been forced to ponder its future in the midst of protracted combat and stabilisation operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite intense operational pressures, the Army has made a considerable progress over the last decade. Innovative doctrine based on Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment (MOLE) and Complex Warfighting has been developed; the Hardened and Networked Army (HNA) initiative has redressed the Army's most serious deficiencies in combined arms and protected mobility; and the 2009 Adaptive Army initiative has brought about the biggest organisational restructure of the land force since the 1970s.²

The Army's theoretical approach to future war is shaped by the reality that previously discrete modes and levels of war have merged under the impact of globalisation and the diffusion of information technology. The impact of these trends has led the Army to abandon the binary framework of high and low-intensity warfare, and to move towards 'a confluence of warfare' in a fusionist, or comprehensive, model of land power. The conceptual emphasis in Australian military theory is now upon the land force contribution to 'wars amongst the people' in joint and multinational campaigns which involve 'Whole of Government' elements and where soldiers must operate alongside a multitude of interagency and non-governmental actors. In such campaigns, stabilisation and reconstruction activities must be integrated with combat operations against diverse irregular adversaries and proxy forces.

¹ Peter Paret, *Innovation and Reform in Warfare* (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy, 1962), p. 2.

² For publications reflecting such initiatives see Australian Army, *Land Warfare Doctrine 1, The Fundamentals of Land Warfare* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2008); and *Adaptive Campaigning: Army's Future Land Operating Concept* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009).

Unlike the US and British armies, the Australian Army has been able to pursue a comprehensive model of land warfare with the advantage of being configured as a medium-weight brigade force—a force that is not expected to undertake major combat operations on the scale that might confront our larger strategic cousins. Thus, the Army's September 2009 capstone future warfighting document, *Adaptive Campaigning: Army's Future Land Operating Concept*, seeks to synthesise a dualistic “war amongst the “people” and a Whole of Government construct into

a single comprehensive concept [that] integrates conventional combat, stabilisation, reconstruction, counterinsurgency, security, civil-military cooperation, and humanitarian and peace support operations.³

As a unitary concept, *Adaptive Campaigning* is designed to confer ‘universal capabilities’ on a land force which is expected to grow to some 30,000 full-time soldiers by 2020. These universal or full-spectrum capabilities are to be enabled by five interrelated lines of operation comprising Joint Land Combat; population protection; information actions; population support; and indigenous capacity building. As an overarching operational framework, *Adaptive Campaigning* is designed to orchestrate military efforts by giving coherence and direction to ground forces in deployments where complex and multidimensional modes of armed conflict are likely to be confronted.

In general terms, much of *Adaptive Campaigning* is compatible with the world's best land warfare practice and reflects the expeditionary outlook of our closest military allies. As such, the Army's overall future direction is to be applauded. However, as with all overarching military concepts, the devil in *Adaptive Campaigning* lies in its detail in two particular internal areas: first, weaknesses in conceptual military theory; and second, underestimation concerning the intellectual demands of both stabilisation and amphibious operations. An external danger is that the development of future land capabilities as envisaged by the *Army Objective Force* plan may suffer as a result of unexpected financial cuts imposed on the Defence Department by Government. This situation may occur if strategic hedging against Chinese military power by developing air-maritime forces becomes the overwhelming concern of Australian policy-makers and defence planners. The remainder of this analysis is devoted to examining these three challenges facing the Army.

Adaptive Campaigning: The Need to Address Weaknesses in Military Theory

In a previous edition of this journal, this author has written on Australian deficiencies in professional military theory and knowledge of the operational

³ *Adaptive Campaigning*, pp. 3-4.

art which, in combination, have resulted in weak concepts and doctrine.⁴ In 2011, there is, for example, still no updated Australian Defence Force (ADF) Future Joint Operating Concept (FJOC) based on uniting stabilisation with combat operations to meet the requirements of unitary or comprehensive warfare.⁵ Because ADF higher joint warfighting doctrine is largely obsolescent, the Army's *Adaptive Campaigning* has been developed in a conceptual vacuum. This has led to the document's authors occasionally transcending the boundaries of sensible land force jurisdiction. For example, *Adaptive Campaigning* suggests that

the Land Force has a requirement to educate and develop joint and interagency commanders skilled in the operational art at all levels from combat team to joint task force.

In order to accomplish this extraordinarily ambitious educational task, 'in the Australian context, a revised approach to campaign planning appears necessary'—an approach which the publication notes may lead to an overturn of traditional notions of operational art.⁶

The above propositions are advanced despite the reality that operational art and campaign skills remain underdeveloped in the current land force and the other single services.⁷ Undeterred by these deficiencies, *Adaptive Campaigning* does not hesitate to accept ideas drawn from the speculative and empirically unproven field of military systemology. A good example of this unfortunate trend is the introduction of the ASDA (Act-Sense-Decide-Adapt) Cycle to supplement the universally-accepted OODA (Observe-Orientate-Decide-Act) Loop, or Boyd Cycle, in order to facilitate what the document calls 'context appropriate action' during operations.⁸

Given the general acceptance of the Boyd Cycle in Western military theory, it is perplexing why the Australian Army—alone amongst Western land forces—has sought to supplement it with an Adaptation Cycle. The latter is a process which simply increases, rather than reduces, the complexity of battlespace command by creating a secondary layer of decision-making. Moreover, given its systems theory origins, the ASDA Cycle is eerily reminiscent of the Israeli Defence Force's experimentation with neo-Newtonian and postmodern ideas prior to its disastrous Lebanon campaign in 2006. Any Adaptation Cycle that justifies its existence by reference to the

⁴ Michael Evans, 'The Closing of the Australian Military Mind: The ADF and Operational Art', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 105-31.

⁵ The current ADF FJOC (Multidimensional Manoeuvre) dates from 2003. See Department of Defence, *Joint Operations for the 21st Century* (Canberra: Strategic Policy Division, 2007).

⁶ Australian Army, *Adaptive Campaigning*, p. 40. Work is currently being undertaken on developing a new FJOC (out to the year 2030) by the Department of Defence's Joint Capability Division and is due for publication in 2012.

⁷ See Trent Scott, *The Lost Operational Art: Invigorating Campaigning into the Australian Defence Force*, Study Paper No. 319 (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, February 2011).

⁸ *Adaptive Campaigning*, pp. 31-5.

gibberish of ‘frame-reflective policy discourse’, a term derived from Foucaultian postmodernism, needs to be questioned by any sensible operational commander.⁹ In sum, ASDA represents a species of military faddism and should be dropped from the Army’s lexicon. In the future, the land force will be far better served by seeking to reinforce the basic pillars of the operational art—such as ‘centre of gravity’ analysis—which remain poorly understood by the Australian profession of arms. In the art of operations, the Army must learn to walk with basic physics before it tries to run into complex systems theory.

Second and Third Grammars: The Need for Improved Knowledge of Stabilisation and Amphibious Warfare

Adaptive Campaigning foresees a future in which the Army requires improved cultural, social media, language skills and area studies for stabilisation operations, while also rediscovering the intricacies of amphibious warfare. In the area of stabilisation, the Army confronts the current dilemma of a lack of dedicated institutional knowledge to underpin Adaptive Campaigning’s strong focus on population operations and indigenous capacity-building. The intellectual problem faced is a paradoxical one: while traditional counterinsurgency (COIN) theory does not adequately explain the character of contemporary stabilisation operations, a deep knowledge of counterinsurgency theory is, nonetheless, the vital precursor to any understanding of the anatomy of modern stabilisation and its evolving inter-agency lexicon. Since 2008, in order to meet this paradox, a five school methodology of studying counterinsurgency has been developed at the Australian Defence College. This methodology comprises knowledge of classical COIN theory; neo-classical COIN ideas; modernisation-interventionist COIN methods; global COIN concepts; and traditional COIN’s gradual merger into a Military Assistance to Security and Development (MASD) construct.

The Army needs to give consideration to using this methodology as a conceptual framework to develop critical knowledge of stabilisation throughout the land force. Irrespective of the strategic outcome in Afghanistan, the problems of ‘persistent conflict’ in the form of irregular operations in failed or fragile states, and against assorted armed non-state actors are likely to fester for many years and will shape future Army deployments. Indeed, there is a good case to be made for the establishment of a small Army Irregular Conflict and Stabilisation Operations Centre (ICSOC)—perhaps under the aegis of Forces Command—to develop specialist knowledge of MASD-like missions, including vital issues of context, complexity and contingency.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35, fn 74.

Such a centre would confer benefit in at least three areas of stabilisation and MASD. First, the Army could use an ICSOC to develop a focus on the multi-faceted requirements involved in Foreign Internal Defence (FID) and the use of both large and small military teams for delivering training, mentoring and operational support to friendly indigenous security forces facing insurgency. Second, an ICSOC could be employed to integrate the theory of special operations with strategy, and to ensure that developments in unconventional warfare capacity are linked to both the Army's and the ADF's conventional capability to achieve maximum operational-strategic effect.¹⁰

Third, given global demographic trends, special attention in any future ICSOC needs to be given to stabilisation missions in urban environments—which may occur as part of international humanitarian relief contingencies, or as coalition combat missions. Urban terrain operations have received comparatively little attention in recent Western military theory in general and in Australian Army doctrine in particular. In the future, because of rapid and ongoing urbanisation in much of Asia and Africa, Australian military theory and doctrine will need to evolve to meet this challenge.¹¹

In terms of amphibious operations, given the arrival later this decade of the new Canberra-class Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) ships, the Army will be compelled to orientate itself towards employment of a 'marine-style' combined arms battlegroup, complete with an embarked air wing. Yet, anyone familiar with Australian military history—or with experience of the development of maritime littoral manoeuvre during the late 1990s—will understand how difficult it has been to adapt the Army's mindset towards an acceptance of amphibious operations. As the author has noted elsewhere, amphibious warfare specialists have always been peripheral figures in the ADF and represent the 'unarmed prophets' of Australian military thought.¹²

Thus, although Adaptive Campaigning makes much of the Army's intention to adopt integrated maritime manoeuvre, the truth is that the land force has largely neglected the concept of Maritime Operations in the Littoral Environment (MOLE). In practice, the latter doctrine has long been overshadowed by Complex Warfighting and the HNA scheme, and is now merged into the comprehensive framework of Adaptive Campaigning. In the

¹⁰ For a discussion see James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, London, Routledge, 2006.

¹¹ See Michael Evans, 'Lethal Genes: The Urban Military Imperative and Western Strategy in the Early Twenty-First Century', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 32, no.4 (August 2009), pp. 515-52

¹² Michael Evans, *The Role of the Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, Working Paper No 101 (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 1998); Michael Evans, 'Unarmed Prophets: Amphibious Warfare in Australian Military Thought', *Journal of the Australian Naval Institute*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January-March 1999), pp. 10-19; Michael Evans, *Developing Australia's Maritime Concept of Strategy: Lessons from the Ambon Disaster of 1942*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Study Paper, No. 303, July 2000.

years ahead, if Australia's amphibious capability is to be successfully developed in its immediate maritime environment, MOLE principles will require special attention by tomorrow's generals. Maritime littoral operations are likely to be a core requirement for the future Army. This means that advanced seaborne skills will be required, if the Army is to successfully execute a Task Force littoral manoeuvre operation in Australia's Primary Operational Environment of the South West Pacific.

This type of operation is exceptionally complex in terms of its demands for distributed operational manoeuvre (fusing joint fires with formation movement and manoeuvre) and in requirements for force generation and sustainment. Currently, knowledge of Ship-to-Objective Manoeuvre (STOM) and sea basing are not well understood by an Army that has for a decade been preoccupied with the deserts and mountains of the Middle East and South Asia. Adding to the Army's historical weakness in amphibious skills is the fact that unlike the US Marines or the British Royal Marines, the land force has no dedicated amphibious task force organisation that can serve to generate real expertise. Serious consideration needs to be given to developing such organisation in the years ahead.

The future demands of both stabilisation and amphibious missions illustrate the need for mastery of the grammar of operational warfare as the acme of professional skill for the Australian soldier. Such mastery requires, in turn, an intimate knowledge of the relationship in twenty-first century operations between different, yet interrelated military grammars. As the military theorist Antulio Echevarria notes, most Western armies are comfortable with what he calls the 'first grammar' of conventional combat operations, but have often floundered in meeting the 'second grammar' of stabilisation and irregular operations.¹³ In the Australian context, it is legitimate to extend this metaphor and to posit that amphibious operations represent a critical 'third grammar' for mastery by the land force. Developing an operational art and campaign expertise that involves an understanding and, if necessary, blending of the grammars of conventional combat, stabilisation and amphibious warfare—and which does so in the context of a conceptual framework of creativity and design—will be vital proficiencies for the Australian Army of the 2020s and beyond.

The China Syndrome: An Air-Maritime Focus and the Future of the Army

One of the major features of the May 2009 Defence White Paper is its concern about the strategic implications of a rising China that seems *en route* to becoming 'the strongest Asian military power by a considerable

¹³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, 'American Operational Art, 1917-2008', in John Andreas Olsen and Martin Van Creveld, eds, *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 137-38, 158-61.

margin'.¹⁴ As a result, the most expensive force structure initiatives in the White Paper are not those on land but in the air-maritime realm—including Joint Strike Fighters, long-range cruise missiles for air warfare destroyers, and the acquisition of new frigates—alongside a decision to double the submarine force as a sea-denial and deterrent force. The danger is that this strong focus on air-maritime capabilities, combined with future funding shortages, will create ominous budgetary pressures. If, as seems likely, hard strategic choices need to be made by Government in the context of such pressures, the Army's capability might suffer in the years ahead, leading the land force to become, as it has been so often in the past, the 'Cinderella service'.

Recent post-White Paper analyses of Australia's defence options in the context of a changing Asia view the strategic future firmly in terms of air-sea capabilities with little consideration given to land forces.¹⁵ Given the renaissance in the Army's fortunes over the last decade, it may seem premature or even gloomy, to speculate on future cuts and shortages. However, it needs to be remembered that when the Australian Army returned from ten years of expeditionary operations in Vietnam in the early 1970s, few generals could have anticipated that two decades later, the land force would be optimised for the barren task of continental defence and be plagued by numerous deficiencies in logistics, mobility and combined arms capabilities. It has taken a decade to restore fundamental land force capabilities and the Army needs to be on its guard that the 'China syndrome' does not become a strategic pathology that justifies renewed neglect of the land force

Conclusion

The study of Australian military history teaches two important strategic lessons for the future. First, a healthy Army is vital to this nation's defence. Second, the Digger always fights offshore in unexpected theatres. Accordingly, the three military grammars of conventional combat, stabilisation and amphibious warfare will be required by the land force in the years to come, and all three must be honed to the highest standards within the framework of a comprehensive operational art. Finally, every future Chief of Army needs to hang on his office wall two quotations as a historical reminder of the land force's strategic constancy as an overseas expeditionary force. The first is Major General Sydney Rowell's laconic January 1942 remark to the Americans that, if the Japanese were foolish enough to land troops in Northern Australia, he would respond by sending for the Australian Army's Salvage Corps 'to pick up the bones [because]

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), p. 34.

¹⁵ Hugh White, 'Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 20 (2010); Ross Babbage, *Australia's Strategic Edge in 2030*, Kokoda Paper No. 15 (Canberra: The Kokoda Foundation, 2011).

there is no water between Broome and Alice Springs'. The second is Prime Minister Robert Menzies' September 1950 speech to the effect that any Australian land force optimised to fight on Australian soil will always be 'the equivalent of a wooden gun'.¹⁶ In these two statements from yesterday lies the essence of strategic wisdom for the land force of today and tomorrow.

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¹⁶ S. F. Rowell, *Full Circle* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), p. 101; Robert Menzies speech, *Current Notes*, vol. XXI (22 September 1950), p. 664.