

The Army after Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is the Australian Army's largest and most demanding current mission. It is therefore essential to incorporate the lessons learned from this operation and to consider the nature of the force after Afghanistan. The withdrawal from Afghanistan should not be seen as a seismic event requiring revolutionary changes or a return to a focus on the defence of Australia with the Army as a strategic afterthought. Afghanistan is more likely to provide a guide to the future direction of the Army than an excuse to go back to the old days.

The Afghanistan operation is far from over. In late 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated that Australia would contribute to support, training and development tasks in Afghanistan "through this decade at least."¹ The current plan is to commence a phased Army withdrawal with improvements in Afghan National Army capabilities in the lead up to elections in 2014. However, it is unlikely that 2014 will see an abrupt end to the Army's presence in Afghanistan. A decreasing Army presence is likely to remain alongside an increased civilian commitment. However, it is time to think beyond Afghanistan and consider what the future of the Army should look like.

The Army after Afghanistan must continue to provide government with a wide range of defence and security options. Given a complex and volatile strategic environment which includes the rise of China, internal instability in many Asian states, uncertainty about the security implications of climate change, and food, water and energy shortages, it is not the time to adopt a narrow view of the Army's future. The Army after Afghanistan must remain a balanced force, able to operate at short notice in joint and combined environments across a wide spectrum of defence and security contingencies.

Army's Future Missions

Future missions and tasks rather than a withdrawal from Afghanistan should inform the size and shape of the Army in the future. The 1997 Australia's Strategic Policy document took the view that Australia would force structure for the defence of Australia, other than at the 'margins'. Contrary to this planning guidance, Army has been actively involved in the 'margins' for the

¹ Hansard, House of Representatives, Tuesday 19 October 2010, p. 694.

last two decades—Cambodia (1992), Somalia (1993), Rwanda (1994), East Timor (1999), Afghanistan (2001), the Solomon Islands (2003), and Iraq (2003). All were expeditionary, land centric campaigns among the populations of failed and failing states.

None of these operations involved the direct defence of Australia, but they did contribute to the security of Australia. All characterise Australia's enduring strategic culture—in theory continental defence, but in practice a willingness to use force overseas in support of a major ally.² It is inevitable that after Afghanistan there will be a determination to 'don't do that again'. Given the current shape of the global environment, however, it would be premature to conclude that Afghanistan will mark the end of Australia's involvement in the world's trouble spots, often as part of our policy of close security alignment with the United States. It will be politically difficult to deny future missions with the United States, the United Nations or NATO. There seems no end to the number of trouble spots in the world, and under an apparent reinvigorated UN approach to the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) doctrine the government might decide to send an Australian Defence Force (ADF) contingent.³ Aside from these global arrangements, there are also regional responsibilities and Australia might again be expected to lead in the event of instability or disaster in the near region.

Of course, the primary mission for the Army must always be to contribute to the defence of the mainland from conventional attack. Within the defence of Australia, there are numerous well defined roles for the Army, both onshore and offshore. To meet these roles, the Army will require conventional capabilities with range, speed, protection, durability, and the ability to operate at distances from support areas in close cooperation with the Navy and Air Force.⁴

These capabilities also provide a sound foundation for other, more likely missions. These contingencies reflect the shift from a narrow focus on defending the nation through territorial defence to the broader and less well defined task of securing the nation. The 2008 *National Security Statement* highlighted the changing nature of defence and security, and the security implications of climate change, food water and energy shortages, the problems of disaster and humanitarian missions and the ongoing threat of terrorism and transnational crime.⁵ These types of events are likely to see

² See Alan Bloomfield and Kim Richard Nossal, 'Towards an Explicative Understanding of Strategic Culture: The Cases of Australia and Canada', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2007), pp. 286-307.

³ The recent operations in Libya and Cote d' Ivoire are recent examples of the involvement of NATO and the UN in international deployments.

⁴ Many of these capabilities were determined and tested in the Army 21 and Restructuring the Army studies conducted during the 1990s.

⁵ See Prime Minister of Australia, 'The First National Security Statement to the Parliament', 4 December 2008, <<http://pmmdudd.archive.dpmc.gov.au/node/5424>> [Accessed 14 May 2011].

the military more involved in humanitarian and disaster missions, and in the support of other government agencies to control mass migration flows.

The Army after Afghanistan must be prepared for a broad range of missions best encompassed by what military theorists refer to as hybrid wars.⁶ In hybrid wars, the enemy uses conventional and irregular types of warfare in a flexible and sophisticated manner.⁷ Non-state actors will concentrate on irregular warfare but will also use conventional weapons, equipment and tactics when appropriate. Conversely, nation states also will use irregular tactics when it suits them. The Army must be prepared to engage in all types of war in an equally sophisticated and flexible manner. Balance is required of the force in its training, equipment, and leadership. Today the Australian Army calls this 'adaptive war fighting'. It is the way of the future.

The Future Force

An Army back from war might be expected to rest and recuperate. Some armies returning from unpopular wars have suffered periods of decline and irrelevance, others have been subjected to 'peace dividends'. This cannot be allowed. The first requirement for the Army after Afghanistan is to continue to provide government with options in meeting Australia's strategic objectives. In the extreme, this force must be able to fight and win the nation's 'land battles'. Such a force will require a mix of the old and the new. In addition, it will need a clearly defined strategic rationale in the next Defence White Paper and a continued substantial budget commitment from government. Such a force should be designed around the following principles.

POSTURE—BALANCED AND FLEXIBLE

The 'just over the line' performance of the Army and the ADF in East Timor in 1999 and the dramatic makeover required to bring the Army to operational levels in Iraq and Afghanistan show the danger of too narrow an interpretation of missions and roles. The Army after Afghanistan must not make the mistake of becoming over-specialised as it did when the strategic rationale was narrowly focused on the defence of Australia. A force able to conduct joint and combined operations across the spectrum of conflict is required. Importantly, the force must be able to match any enemy escalation within an area of operations. This means a high end force with sophisticated conventional capabilities able to selectively operate at high intensity levels. The enemy chooses how he will fight, not us.

⁶ For example Frank Hoffman in *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, <http://www.potomac institute.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=77:-conflict-in-the-21st-century-the-rise-of-hybrid-wars&catid=40:books&Itemid=62> [Accessed 14 May 2011].

⁷ Frank G. Hoffmann, 'Hybrid Warfare and Challenges', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 52 (2009), pp. 34-9.

SIZE—LARGER

After Afghanistan, there will be a temptation to reduce the size of the Army. This would be a mistake. Under the 'Hardened and Networked Army' plan and 'Enhanced Land Force' initiative, the size of the Army is increasing to around 30,000 personnel over the next few years. This is a smaller Army than when Australia withdrew from Vietnam in 1973.⁸ The tempo of operations over the last decade has shown the requirement for an Army with sufficient critical mass to allow planners and commanders to simultaneously deploy force to multiple dispersed areas. Commanders must also sustain the force over extended periods by effectively managing the number and duration of deployments for individual soldiers and their units. In the longer term there may well be a requirement to consider even further increases to the size of the Army. The areas to be reviewed should be those units involved in civil military cooperation tasks such as construction engineers, military police, communications specialists, and intelligence and headquarters staff.

EQUIPMENT—MORE, IMPROVED AND QUICKER TURNOVER

There is no comparison between a soldier who deployed to East Timor in 1999 and a soldier deploying to Afghanistan today. Today's soldier has the latest technology and is well supported with protection, intelligence, combat support, logistics and medical technology that give him a strong chance of succeeding and surviving on the modern battlefield. This must be the baseline for the Army in the future. It must be equipped with the latest technology and best equipment and this must penetrate the force all the way to the Reserves rather than be wafer thin and just for the deploying force. By the turn of last century, strategic guidance and acquisition methods had placed our soldiers at unacceptable risk. A revised approach to strategic formulation and new acquisition methods are required.

CHARACTER—RETAIN

The Australian Army has been hardened. It has gone from an Army at peace to an Army at war. Its soldiers know how to fight. They temper their warrior spirit with compassion, dignity and respect when operating among the population. They understand culture and have been ambassadors for Australia. Their values and ethos have been proven. These values must be nurtured and kept for the next generations of Australian soldiers just as they were sustained by the notable generation who stayed in the Army after Vietnam. Their focus on training and doctrine gave the Australian Army the platform it needed to sustain its performance over the last two decades. This foundation must be maintained for future battles.

⁸ 1973—34,000 against an Australian population of 13.3 million. 2011—a projected figure of 30,000 against a population of 22.5 million.

AMPHIBIOUS AND EXPEDITIONARY

A maritime strategy is the right strategy for Australia as an island nation. But this does not mean only ships and planes. An amphibious capability able to deliver balanced naval, land and air forces will be required for almost every defence contingency in the future. This includes securing our offshore territories, denying bases to an enemy posing a direct threat to the mainland, moving large forces around Australia, deploying to overseas operational areas and supporting disaster and humanitarian missions. The introduction of the Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) ships beyond 2014 will significantly enhance the amphibious capability of the ADF. Integrating the capabilities of the Navy and Army to ensure that the full capabilities of the ships are realised will be a substantial task for the Army and will require a priority effort.

HYBRID WARFARE—BE PREPARED

Over the last decade, most Western armies have scrambled to develop new doctrine and techniques to deal with flexible and thinking enemies engaging in hybrid warfare. This has required armies to conduct stabilisation and counterinsurgency missions to bring security, stability and development to fragile states. These tasks have proven extremely difficult. They require a comprehensive military approach alongside an extensive range of civil military cooperative activities. In Australia, initial processes have been developed but more needs to be done to coordinate the efforts of the ADF, the Australian Federal Police, AusAID, the new Australian Civil Corps, and Non-governmental Organisations. As a key player and the most likely advance guard for all stabilisation missions, the Army must become actively involved in improving the level of coordination and cooperation between all of these disparate agencies.

FORCE GENERATION AND PREPAREDNESS

Warning time is a thing of the past. Geopolitical shifts and disasters occur with little warning. Witness the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. Disasters and humanitarian missions are likely to increase as populations grow placing even more demands on an already fragile and stressed planet. Within this environment, a new approach to preparedness and force generation needs to be developed. It is likely to result in more troops being at shorter notice to move. Army must develop new means to manage and afford new preparedness approaches.

ACCOUNTABILITY—POWER TO THE CHIEF

Like his counterparts in Navy and Air Force, the Chief of Army after Afghanistan needs to have both the responsibility and authority to do his job. The serial reviews and reorganisations of the Department of Defence have all but obliterated the ability of the Service Chiefs to command their service and be held responsible for their raise, train and sustain functions. Responsibility and accountability arrangements are slow, complicated by the

diarchic structure of defence, obscured by a convoluted money trail and a thoroughly confusing shared service model where roles and tasks are poorly defined.⁹ A greater clarity of roles and responsibilities is required, with a focus on military output rather than bureaucratic process and employment opportunities for Deputy Secretaries.¹⁰

Conclusion

History has shown that an Army changes best when faced with adversity. The last decade of operational service has been difficult but it has produced enormous beneficial changes in the Australian Army. The Army has been tested and it has delivered. Its soldiers have served with courage, compassion and humanity. They are combat hardened and have served the nation with pride and distinction. As the nature of the Army after Afghanistan is explored it must be done with a resolve to keep the best of the old and build on the foundation of a newly confident and accomplished force. In preparing for the future the Army must consolidate the gains of the last decade and be prepared for an uncertain and demanding future. There should be no turning back.

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⁹ Little has been done to improve this situation since the 2007 Proust Defence Management Review. The matter of accountability is discussed in detail at pp. 17-28.

¹⁰ The dimensions of the problem are best illustrated by the number of Deputy Secretaries in the Department of Defence. They substantially outnumber the Service officers at the same level and seem on a constant growth path.