

# The Future of the Australian Army

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The army of an island nation will always be either a purely defensive force or an expeditionary one. For most of our short history, Australian armies have been expeditionary, and they have been the principal instrument of Australian strategic policy. But that ended after Vietnam, when for the first time Australia's key defence objective became the direct and independent defence of the island-continent. This was a job for the Navy and the Air Force, with Army required only to round up any small enemy forces that might evade the air and naval defences. Expeditionary operations were no longer a priority, and the Army's role became secondary and purely defensive.

## Army's Expeditionary Renaissance

Fortunately for Army that did not last long. Over the last twenty years, Army has regained both its role as an expeditionary force and its place as Australia's principal strategic instrument. This renaissance has been driven by two trends. The more obvious one is the proliferation of stabilisation operations of many different kinds since the end of the Cold War. The other trend, less obvious until recently, has been the slow recognition that the shift of relative economic and military power in Asia carried risks to Australia's wider strategic interests in Asia, raising the possibility that Australia might one day need defend them with armed force.<sup>1</sup>

Army naturally took the leading role in stabilisation operations, and was engaged in them almost continually from the early 1990s. After the East Timor crisis in 1999, it became widely accepted that expeditionary stabilisation operations in Australia's immediate neighbourhood was now the Army's primary task.<sup>2</sup> After 9/11, as it became more and more committed to more distant stabilisation operations in Iraq and Afghanistan these too started to loom large in Army's future.

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of these developments see: Hugh White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia: Finding a New Balance in Australia's Defence Policy* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2006); Hugh White 'Four Decades of the Defence of Australia: Reflections on Australian Defence Policy over the Past 40 Years', in Ron Huiskens and Meredith Thatcher (eds), *History as Policy: Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy* (Canberra: ANU E Press, The Australian National University, 2007), pp. 163-87.

<sup>2</sup> Department for Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), paras 8.10-14.

The idea that Army also had a central role to play in defending Australia's wider strategic interests in Asia emerged more obscurely. The nature of those interests and the broad strategic objectives that flowed from them was set in the 2000 White Paper<sup>3</sup>, but little thought has been given to the kind of military operations that would be required, nor the forces needed. In the absence of such analysis, and in the light of Army's prestige, it has been easy to simply assume that Army would play the lead role in them too.

Together these two expeditionary tasks have banished the idea of a defensive Army more or less completely. In its place, a vision has evolved of an expeditionary force designed to do both tasks—low-level stabilisation operations on the one hand, medium to high level conventional operations on the other. The challenge has been to design a force that can do both. Current plans for Army's future—'Adaptive', 'Flexible', 'Hardened and Networked'—presuppose that this can be done. They envisage an Army of the future that would be very like the one we have today, only a bit bigger and a bit better. The question is whether these will turn out to be the most important tasks for Australia's military over the next few decades, and whether the Army we now plan will be able to deliver them.

## **The Future of Stabilisation**

What is the future of military stabilisation operations? It is easy to assume that stabilisation operations went out of favour in the 1970s and 1980s—both in Australia and more broadly—simply because of a post-Vietnam aberration, and that their return to favour since 1990 has been a return to 'normal'. This might be a mistake. The West's recent experience of stabilisation operations has at best been mixed. The larger and more demanding ones into which the United States and its allies have been drawn under the aegis of the War on Terror have been very sobering indeed. It is quite possible that once we all get out of Afghanistan, the enthusiasm for further entanglements in the internal affairs of weak states will cool markedly. The recent highly ambivalent response to the crisis in Libya seems to point in this direction. The combination of confidence and fear that impelled America into these commitments seems to be fading. America is now less convinced that it is directly threatened by events in places like Afghanistan, and less sure that it has the power to do much about them.

On the other hand, Americans are becoming more aware that the greatest challenge to America's place in the world does not come from weak states in the Middle East but from strong ones in Asia. Stabilisation operations are starting to look like a distraction. And unless America takes the lead, the chances of Australia wanting to make substantial commitments to stabilisation operations anywhere beyond our own region are low. Moreover the rationale for them is slipping as strategic circumstances change. Since

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Chapter 4.

the early 1980s the key reason Australia has joined such operations has always been to bolster our credentials as a US ally during decades when there was no opportunity to demonstrate them closer to home in Asia. If China's rivalry with America sharpens, we will find our alliance credentials being tested much closer to home. All this suggests that it might be a mistake to plan our future Army on the assumption that we will continue to use it much for contributions to US-led stabilisation coalitions in the Middle East.

Of course, these have not been the only stabilisation missions the Army has undertaken. Operations in our own immediate neighbourhood have often loomed larger, both because unique Australian interests are more directly engaged, and because we have invariably taken the lead. There is no reason to expect this will not continue. Australia's concern with the stability of our small weak neighbours derives directly from our enduring interest in denying them to any potentially hostile power, and that concern will only become more significant if strategic competition between major powers in Asia intensifies.<sup>4</sup> It is a fair bet, then, that supporting stability in these islands will remain a high strategic priority.

It is harder to say, however, what this means for the Army. First there is a question of size. If we face nothing more serious than the relatively small demands of recent operations in East Timor and Solomon Islands, then the future Army now being planned will probably be sufficient. But if we face a larger-scale collapse of order in Papua New Guinea, for example then the kind of Army we are now planning will do very little for us. It simply will not be big enough to make much contribution to stability in even a portion of the country. If Australia wants military options to support stability in the event of large-scale crises in our immediate neighbourhood, we will need a much bigger army than anything now being considered.

Second, there is the question of capability. For all the talk of flexibility and adaptation, armies remain highly specialised organisations. The more they are trained and equipped for several divergent roles, the less capable they will be in any one of them. The risk is that by trying to build a force that can do both stabilisation and conventional combat, we will end up with a force that is not very good at either. That is a very real risk for Army today. Moreover there remains a question about whether the Army is the right tool for a job which is primarily a policing function anyway, and more deeply still whether the deployment of forces of any kind is really a cost-effective way to help support stability in our neighbourhood. For all these reasons, we need to be careful about assuming that the Army we are planning will be a cost-effective tool for supporting stability in the immediate neighbourhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., para 4.8.

## Defending Strategic Interests

Let's turn then to the other big question about the future of Army: what contribution it can or should make to defending Australia's wider strategic interests against conventional military threats in a more contested Asia. The 2009 White Paper clearly identified threats to Asia's peace and stability from growing major power competition as Australia's primary strategic concern. The risk is that Australia will either find itself wanting to provide substantial support for United States in high-level conflict with a major power like China, or trying to defend its most vital strategic interests from China alone. The question is whether expeditionary land-force operations would offer a cost-effective way to achieve either of the goals.

This is an important question because a lot of money is being committed to developing expeditionary, and especially amphibious, capacities for medium to high level operations. The Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) and Air Warfare Destroyer (AWD) projects in particular only make sense if this is the objective, and that in turn only makes sense if amphibious operations would provide cost-effective options in a major Asian conflict. These are hard issues to analyse, because we have to contemplate situations very different from anything in our recent experience. But once we begin to understand the scale and nature of crisis that we could face in a conflict between Asian major powers, it becomes clear that expeditionary land operations of any kind would be most unlikely to provide viable strategic options for Australia.

First, there is a simple question of scale. Australia has, by Asian standards, a very small army, and that would remain true even if we doubled or trebled its size. Moreover, we will always have a very limited amphibious capability. We have to consider whether we could achieve significant strategic results, either close to home by ourselves or in support of the United States further afield, by landing a battalion or two, or even a brigade or two, on territory held by a major Asian power. More broadly, it is a safe assumption that any US campaign in Asia, let alone any independent Australian operation, would avoid meeting any substantial Asian power on land. Western power in Asia has always been maritime, and land wars in Asia have almost always gone badly. Air and naval forces are our best comparative advantage, and we should be careful not to abandon that.

Finally, and perhaps most decisively, there is the question of sea control. Expeditionary land operations require sea control to allow forces to be deployed, reinforced, sustained and withdrawn. Without a high level of confidence that sea control can be established and maintained over waters contested by the adversary, such operations are simply out of the question. So the viability of expeditionary land operations in a major Asian conflict depends absolutely on our ability to achieve high levels of sea control over large areas of water against a highly capable opponent. There are no grounds for such confidence over coming decades. The key military trend in

Asia over the past decade or more has been the steady growth in China's sea denial capabilities. There is no reason to assume that this trend will not continue. The United States itself acknowledges that it is losing the ability to deploy surface units in the face of Chinese sea-denial forces. The idea that over coming decades Australia could do so is simply unrealistic.

### **Back to the 'Defence of Australia'?**

These reflections lead to a rather sobering conclusion. It seems unlikely that the Army as it is now envisaged will have much capacity to achieve much in either of the two key kinds of expeditionary operations for which it is being designed. It will be too small to respond effectively to a major crisis in any of our more important and vulnerable small neighbours, and most probably incapable even of being deployed in the event of a major Asian conflict. One is forced to wonder whether the Army's future really is as an expeditionary force or not. It may be that our stabilisation objectives can be better achieved by other, non-military means, and our wider strategic interests defended more cost-effectively by sea-denial operations undertaken by naval and air forces. If so, what is the Army for?

Of course there will always be small tasks for the army offshore—minor operations involving transit across uncontested waters. But the biggest task for Army in the Asian century may well be the defence of the continent itself. A key question for Australia over coming years is whether, in a more contested Asia, we aim to be able to defend ourselves against a major Asian power independently. This is a daunting prospect, but it might not be as hard as it sounds and we can hardly consider ourselves a middle power if we cannot. Clearly the key to defending the continent remains the denial of our air and sea approaches to adversary forces, rather than conducting a continental-scale land campaign on the continent itself. However, land forces play a key role in a maritime-denial campaign, because a paradox of maritime defence is that the bigger the force that an adversary must project onto our soil, the easier it is to stop him from getting here. Army therefore has a vital role: to provide enough opposition to ensure that any attacker would have to come in sufficient force to offer a valuable and vulnerable target to Australia's air and sea denial forces.<sup>5</sup> Too little work has been done on what precisely that means for the nature and scale of capabilities needed in Army, but it is clear that it would require larger and heavier forces than those designed for low level contingencies back in the 1980s, or for stabilisation operations in the immediate neighbourhood more recently.

The idea that a defensive army is after all what Australia needs is an uncomfortable conclusion, and runs contrary to much of our military history.

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<sup>5</sup> Kitchener made this argument about Australia's land-force needs in his 1905 Review of Australia's defence, and it was also used in British defence debates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But we should bear in mind that if, as seems likely, the next few decades mark the end of the 'Vasco da Gama era', we are entering new territory and must expect some surprises, not all of the pleasant.

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