
The Future for Land Forces

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From the land force point of view the White Paper confirms Army's present trajectory and gives a firm boost to Army's signature proposal—Plan Beersheba. This is a good thing as, when implemented, Plan Beersheba will allow Army to more effectively generate combat organisations and train troops for future operations and then deploy and sustain an appropriate force. Given recent reductions in defence spending Army will have to make do with less for the foreseeable future. If the current reductions in defence spending continue there will be problems in redressing the capability deficiencies inevitably resulting from restrictions on training, maintenance and delays in acquiring new capital equipment.

Expectations for the 2013 White Paper were low and they were admirably satisfied by the government. It is the sort of White Paper you hope for when you do not really need one, there is not much to announce and not enough money to pay for new projects anyhow. It is essentially a conservative prescription for defence and it deservedly passed with few concerns and little fanfare. At the international level it attempts to repair the damage caused to Australia's relationship with China by the Rudd hedging excursion in the 2009 White Paper. At the national level it encouragingly hints at Defence acknowledging that it is part of the broader Australian national security community and it finally introduces some clarity into the submarine debate. There are positive indications of real policies for cyber and space and recognition of the importance of Indonesia as a partner in Australia's security future. For Army there is little damage and on a positive note it confirms Army's development path and approves Plan Beersheba.

The paper's conservative nature should be seen as a win for the realists within the Department of Defence. Unlike the politicians, the Department has a clear understanding of the links between strategy, capability and budget. Well done to the Chief of the Defence Force and the Secretary who must have had a real battle on their hands to achieve this somewhat guarded White Paper. Their battle is not yet over. Now they have to continue the struggle to restore the Defence budget to a figure in excess of 2% of GDP before some of the damage that has already been done to defence capability becomes irreversible.

The Australian Army

The immediate future for the Australian Army is to return from a period of more than a decade on high tempo operations. On return to Australia the Army has the task of repairing, rebalancing and getting ready for future deployments. Hopefully more than a few soldiers might get a bit of a rest.

However, there is unlikely to be much rest as the one real lesson of the recent past is that we should not expect much warning time for stabilisation, humanitarian and disaster relief the most likely future tasks for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Quite serious international situations can develop quickly and the way the world looks at the moment they are quite likely to occur. As a result Australia requires a ready, balanced and capable land force.

Army's recent history has been one of constant and often concurrent global deployments on demanding operations. Lessons have been learned in East Timor, Afghanistan, the Solomon Islands and Iraq as well as on a broad range of United Nations deployments and humanitarian and disaster relief missions. There are lessons of preparedness, the equipment and capabilities required for modern operations, command and control, joint and combined operations, military diplomacy, tactics, techniques and procedures, procurement and leadership that must be confirmed and built into the future Army. One important consideration will be how to introduce and use unmanned aerial vehicles in a coordinated and ethical manner. Gaining maximum benefit from the lessons learning task will require introspection, integrity and application and will take a considerable period of time. Some of the lessons will be uncomfortable for the Army, Defence, the bureaucracy and government but they must be pursued if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past. While the White Paper does express an intention to keep the ADF at around its present level there is a degree of ambiguity around just how wedded government is to this aim. Reducing the size of the Army or diminishing its already modest capabilities would be a serious mistake.

BUILDING A FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE ARMY

The longer term task for the Army is to build a flexible and adaptable force able to meet the White Paper requirements across all four defence designated tasks.¹ These tasks are expected and are a reflection of Australia's strategic culture and our strategic needs. They are beset by disagreement on their likelihood and therefore degree of risk associated with how and when they are to be achieved.

While some are confident in predicting the type of operations that will dominate the future and ascribe priority to them the harsh reality is that nobody really knows. In practice the government wants the ADF to be able to provide a broad range of options across all designated tasks. These options are generally required at short notice and are hampered by the fact that successive governments have not been prepared to fund defence to adequately prepare the defence force and especially the Army for the range or scale of potential operations.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2012), paras 3.30-60.

Over the last two decades Army has struggled with this transfer of political risk to operational risk for the ADF and its soldiers. Army was not well resourced for East Timor and struggled. Arrangements were somewhat better for Afghanistan and Iraq but there was still an enormous amount of catch up to be done and most of the funding to conduct operations was in the form of supplementation rather than base funding. Without adequate funding Army stands in danger of again languishing in budget purgatory and being ill-prepared for the most likely future tasks—peace support, stabilisation and humanitarian and disaster relief missions. Army can and has acted to prioritise its allocated budget but as shown by the recent cancellation of the self-propelled artillery project the overall Army budget is inadequate and there are no good options to reduce expenditure.

The Way to the Future

Building the type of force required will present challenges for the Army. The major challenges are; implementing Plan Beersheba, building a coherent communications network, acquiring protected mobility vehicles and in conjunction with the Royal Australian Navy developing an ADF amphibious capability. Each of these tasks is underway and together they provide a solid foundation for the Army of the future.

PLAN BEERSHEBA

Government endorsement of Plan Beersheba in the White Paper is a major step forward for Army and positions it well for the future.² It restructures the Army into three 'like' multi-role combat brigades and signals the culmination of decade long development plans to harden, enhance and adapt the Army. It is a major achievement for the current Chief of Army. While it comes with some training and maintenance costs they are worthwhile absorbing.

Implementation of Plan Beersheba means that Army moves from an Army of singular capabilities and limited depth to an Army of three balanced brigades with similar organisations including armour, artillery, communications, engineer, infantry and aviation elements. The new structures mean that Army will have a supportable force generation and training cycle and the ability to offer a sustainable rotation capability. Achievement of Plan Beersheba means that Army is closer to being able to realize its primary preparedness task of deploying and rotating a brigade sized force. This has been a long standing task for Army and the fact that it has been unable to achieve it over many years has been a major failing in the preparedness and concurrency system of the ADF.

NETWORKING COMMUNICATIONS

Networking is being pursued under a plethora of projects which have generally proceeded slowly and have been a source of considerable

² Ibid., paras 8.62-66.

frustration. Networking communications receives barely a mention in the White Paper but is perhaps one of the most important projects Army has underway at the moment.³ These multiple projects have been difficult to integrate and their successful introduction across a force operating throughout the full spectrum of land and maritime environments is a considerable challenge. New digital radio systems will be introduced and will give Army unprecedented access to information. Their proper implementation will greatly assist battle management, mission planning and execution. When introduced, broadly across the entire Army, digital networks will be a considerable force multiplier and will revolutionize the way Army does business.

PROTECTED MOBILITY

Improvised explosive devices, in or alongside roads, have been devastatingly effective in recent conflicts. The days of soldiers being transported in vehicles made of tin and canvas are long gone. The White Paper sensibly confirms the requirement for personnel to be provided with deployable vehicles offering improved protection, firepower and mobility.⁴ In what are essentially re-announcements it confirms plans to acquire new medium and heavy trucks and to replace Army's fighting vehicles and associated fighting systems. In another re-announcement it confirms plans to acquire additional Bushmaster vehicles and the allocation of some of them to the Reserve. However, there is a limit to how many Bushmasters the Army needs.

The major projects are centred on Land 121 and Land 400. Land 121, which broadly speaking replaces all Army's trucks, is underway but slow and beset by the normal project delays and concerns. One additional concern is the basis of provisioning. Due to overall budget considerations Army was long ago forced to trade off the numbers of trucks being acquired for higher levels of protection. As a result not all trucks will be fully protected and capable of being deployed. This will introduce fleet management and training difficulties and may well impose operational restrictions.

Land 400 is essential for the future of the Army. It is Army's largest and most complex project and will run well beyond 2025. It aims to replace the Army's current armoured vehicles (M113 APC and ASLAV) with an integrated suite of land combat vehicles. There is no clear indication yet what the vehicle will be but in order to cope with the increased complexity and lethality of land operations they will require improved protection, firepower and mobility. Given the cost and scale of this project the major concern is that it will be an enticing target for the budget scalp hunters. They will try to nibble away at it and reduce its scale, scope and extend its delivery date. They must be resisted.

³ Ibid., para 8.72.

⁴ Ibid., paras 8.67-69.

AMPHIBIOUS CAPABILITY

As an island nation Australia sensibly pursues a maritime strategy.⁵ Army has an important role to play as a contributor to this strategy. Under the broad task of controlling the approaches to Australia the land forces can protect bases, defeat incursions onto Australian territory, secure and recover offshore territories and in support of other partners deny any enemy access to staging bases in our neighbourhood. With the arrival of the Landing Helicopter Dock the role of the Army, in a maritime strategy, will be made easier and extended to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuation operations and stabilisation missions in the region. The allocation of 2nd Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment to this new role will allow the development of an unprecedented level of cooperation between the Royal Australian Navy and the Australian Army.

The Future Doesn't Stop With a White Paper

White Papers are a snapshot of a finite future. This one is distorted because of an unwillingness to fund the present, let alone the future. The work of planning continues and Army is well positioned to shape and plan well beyond the scope of this White Paper. It has invested in a continuous and thorough process to think about modernisation, strategic planning and how to shape the future. There are plenty of things to think about.

SPECIAL FORCES

Special Forces have been the force of choice over the last decade. They have demonstrated incredible bravery and flexibility and have never disappointed at any task they have been given. They are truly the vanguard of the Army. An important task for the future is to migrate many of their hard won skills and techniques into the rest of the Army. At the same time the Special Forces must keep looking ahead with their trademark approach of overcoming obstacles with imagination and vigour.

While a decision is yet to be made about leaving a Special Forces counter-terror force in Afghanistan careful thought must be given to this commitment. The first question is what is to be achieved when the counter-terror problem has mostly shifted from Afghanistan to other regions and countries. Terror remains an issue in our own region and we cannot discount home grown terrorists. Is Afghanistan the best place to commit our scarce elite force and what will they be tasked to achieve?

If they are to remain in Afghanistan we must recognize that the task will be dangerous and complicated. We must assure ourselves that our troops are protected and adequately resourced and able to conduct their task in a legal and ethical manner. A strong status of forces agreement, crystal clear rules

⁵ Ibid., paras 3.42-47.

of engagement and meticulous, auditable and legally sanctioned targeting procedures must be non-negotiable elements of any Australian commitment.

PERSONNEL

As the tempo of operations decrease it will be natural for many in the Army to feel that with diminished opportunities for operational deployments it is time to leave and try something else. This is to be expected and those discharging should be commended for their service to the Nation. Recruiting and retaining their replacements will be a challenge as will ensuring that the right calibre of people are available to deal with the increasing sophistication and complexity of Army equipment and operations.

Great strides are being made with the employment of women in the Army. A broad based plan of recruitment, cultural adjustment and opening up employment opportunities is underway and is having a positive impact. This is a credit to the efforts of the current Chief of Army and the maturity and good judgement of Army personnel overall.

Combat operations have taken a toll on the Army with many soldiers wounded both physically and psychologically. Much to its credit Army is doing a great job looking after its wounded soldiers. They are well supported by other parts of government such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and more recently by a number of charities. Support will be required for a long time as will community engagement and understanding for wounded soldiers.

FORCE POSTURE

The White Paper struggles with the issue of force posture and how to reconcile the recent report by Allan Hawke and Ric Smith with the problem of the cost of developing new bases. What is clear is that there are too many bases in Australia and many of them are in the wrong places. They present a considerable cost to the ADF. Closure of some bases and consolidation of others offer the chance of considerable savings. Many bases could be closed now but remain open for a lack of political will.

A considerable portion of the force posture discussion is on northern basing. Army already has the majority of its combat force in the north with well established bases and convenient access to training areas. Apart from consideration of closing smaller Army bases, which will inevitably be Army Reserve depots, there is no justification for any major change to Army's bases.

ARMY RESERVE

Over recent years the Army Reserve has proven itself to be an indispensable part of the total force. They have delivered significant capability and real value for money during recent operations. They have made a focused and substantial contribution and have clearly demonstrated

their readiness and relevance to contemporary operations. One real challenge for the future Army will be to maintain the active involvement of the Army Reserve in everything that Army does. The implementation of Plan Beersheba presents a clear opportunity for this as it involves the integration of Reserve units into each Regular Brigade. Plan Beersheba offers a continuing platform for the close integration of the Army Reserve into the total force. This approach is to be endorsed and encouraged.

EQUIPMENT MODERNISATION AND DISTRIBUTION ACROSS THE FORCE

The Army in the field today is stunningly different from that which deployed to East Timor in 1999. Everyone, including the Defence Materiel Organisation, should be proud of what has been achieved. The combat equipment worn by individual soldiers and the level of technology afforded to deployed forces through intelligence, surveillance, mobility and protection is almost the stuff of movies. The deployed Army is indeed a modern force. This has been substantially achieved by one off buys and top up purchases made by rapid acquisitions outside the normal acquisition process. These gains cannot be allowed to slip and this level of technology and equipment provisioning must become the norm for the entire Army. It must also be refreshed on a regular basis. Doing this will be a considerable challenge and is unlikely to be adequately funded or supported by the current acquisition processes.

MAKING ARMY'S CASE

Another important task for Army is to continue to make its case as a versatile and entirely necessary element of the ADF. Given the events of the last decade plus it shouldn't have to do this but regrettably it is necessary. Despite clear evidence of the need for an adaptable, ready, sizeable and capable Army there are still some who would reduce Army's capabilities and allocate it a narrow role as a strategic goalkeeper for the defence of Australia or for limited paramilitary duties in the South Pacific. These ideas diminish the overall effectiveness and utility of the ADF and are dangerous to the individual soldiers who will, in the future, be asked to go to war. They also deny the predictions of our intelligence agencies that overwhelmingly assess that a direct attack on Australia is unlikely. Even after this evidence, following the 2009 Defence White Paper, Professor Hugh White offered the idea that, "a defensive Army is after all what Australia needs."⁶

Despite initiating or presiding over the strategies that ran the Australian Army down during the 80s and 90s and saw it dangerously ill-prepared for operations in East Timor and beyond, some individuals still advocate reducing the Army in both size and capability. Emeritus Professor Paul Dibb expressed his disappointment that the opportunity was not taken in this

⁶ Hugh White, 'The Future of the Australian Army', *Security Challenges*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Winter 2011), pp. 27-32.

White Paper to “kibosh” army’s bid to replace all its armoured and mechanised capabilities.⁷

One of the clear lessons of the last ten years is that even non-state actors can make the battlefield or indeed city streets very lethal places and that protection and mobility are non-negotiable requirements for our soldiers in the future. One can only admire the confidence of Professors Dibb and White and their acolytes in expressing their views on what the Army of the future should look like. But their confidence is ill-founded. Caution is needed as their designs for Australia’s defence have already been proven to be ill-considered. Do we want to take another chance and design the future Land force based on such a narrow view of the future and once again produce an Army ill-prepared for the most likely future? It is folly for them to presume that they can predict the future or somehow know what government will want. The lives of our soldiers are too important to accept such narrow prescriptions of the future.

Conclusion

This article has covered the land force for the future. The truth is that the 2013 White Paper is most likely a prescription for just the next two years. If the Liberal-National Coalition is elected in September they have committed to the production of a new White Paper in the following 18 months. Given the bipartisan nature of defence in Australia and the lack of political will, from both parties, to allocate additional funds don’t hold your breath for any significant change to the land force.

The last decade for Army has been busy. Now on return to Australia the Army will have to adjust to a new era of being an Army ‘at peace’. This is not an excuse to take it easy. There is plenty of work to be done and no one knows how long the ‘peace’ will last. Lessons must be learned and incorporated into force structure and design. There are plenty of positive projects to be introduced and Plan Beersheba will result in fundamental and very positive changes. Now the future just needs to be properly funded. Adequate and consistent funding from government, whichever one is in power, is the real challenge for the future.

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⁷ Paul Dibb, ‘Show us the money for Defence spending’, *The Australian*, 6 May 2013, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/show-us-the-money-for-defence-spending/story-e6frgd0x-1226635611440>> [Accessed 19 May 2013].