



Does Australia try to punch too far above its weight?

On any reading of Australian diplomatic and military history, at least since the end of World War II, the overriding policy has been to persuade larger powers to protect our security interests while we make token military commitments to their efforts.

If the Australian response to the so-called 'war on terrorism' is any different, it is because the Americans have taken the initiative while Australia has been in the forefront of the supporting chorus, at least in rhetorical terms.

When, last week, US President George Bush nominated Iraq, Iran and North Korea as rogue states that would have to be dealt with, the prime minister was quick to agree and to assert that Australia would do its bit.

While not disputing the intention, the real question is what we will be able to contribute?

Including our latest commitment to the enforcement of sanctions on Iraq, Australia currently has deployed some 5000 military personnel on a range of operations extending from Africa to the Pacific. It insists it can do this in an apparently open-ended way without expanding its defence budget. This assertion is reminiscent of Norman Lindsay's fantasy of *The Magic Pudding* which continually replaced itself.

The ADF has been steadily reduced in size ever since the Vietnam War but especially over the past decade during which personnel numbers were cut by more than a quarter. Re-equipment programs such as the navy's frigates, airborne early warning aircraft, long range radar, helicopters and light transports are just some that have been delayed to allow the government to send troops off to East Timor and elsewhere within a financial commitment that has not even kept pace with the increase in personnel costs. It doesn't make sense but, then, peacetime defence policy in Australia has never made much sense - at least in real rather than declaratory terms.

The navy is bearing a heavy burden. With only nine instead of its authorised 14 frigates actually in service, it has three committed to the Middle East, three more to catching asylum seekers and another to support peace operations in Bougainville and The Solomons.

As an aside, three of the nine frigates are the original ANZACs built without their full outfit of weapons and sensors on the always specious notion that they could be upgraded when the need arose. The original intention of this policy - apart from saving money - was that these ships would be used only for local patrol duties rather than war fighting. In fact, they could not be deployed as they stand in any extended combat role. To be fair, the present government reversed this policy and the later ships will get their full outfit during construction while the older vessels will be upgraded.

Apart from the strain this heavy naval commitment places on crews and their families, the wear and tear on the ships plus cutbacks in training for replacements and for the submarine force, for example, reduce the time available for maintenance and modernisation. The impact of this excessive commitment will be felt for another decade regardless of any sustained or additional commitments that might be made by a government

which seems to have little idea of how to provide a sustainable defence force.

Thus far, Australia's commitment to the war on terrorism could be said to be roughly proportional to that of the United States and Britain. The problem for us is that we have over-stretched the navy so that any expanded commitment will have to come from the army and RAAF. But both these Services are feeling the strain, the Army from equipment shortages and the on-going commitment to Timor and other minor operations, and the RAAF from a severe shortage of air crews and a heavy modernisation program.

One outcome of the high level of operational commitments is an increasing rate of departures from the ADF. While the media and some academics with their infatuation with gender issues focus on the higher rate of female departures, the fact is that the current rate overall is too high and will go higher if the work load on personnel and their families is not reduced.

Meantime, the key financial ministers have said that there will be no more money for defence. That of course is a political choice rather than a fiscal one. What the Cabinet seemingly refuse to confront is the reality that Australia cannot commit and sustain a defence force to current operations, however politically desirable that may be, and meet their obligation to handing on an effective force to their successors. ●

In The Region

The Singapore Air Force has identified six possible aircraft types to replace its fleet of A-4SU Super Skyhawks. They are:

- Sukhoi Su-35
- Eurofighter Typhoon
- Dassault Rafale
- F-16 Block 60 Fighting Falcon
- F-18E/F Hornet
- F-15E Eagle

Australian ship builder Tenix Defence has won a follow-on order worth A\$150 million to build six patrol boats for the Philippines' Coastguard. The company will build two 56-metre Search and Rescue (SAR) vessels and four 35-metre high-speed search and rescue vessels, with an option to build ten more 35-metre vessels in Phase 2 of the project, commencing 2003.

Russia's Far East air defence network has been threatened with closure for failure to pay its electricity bills amounting to more than A\$10 million. Russia has 1.25 million personnel in its armed forces. ●

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The media and a 'right-to-know'

There is a simple solution to the assumption if not accusation that the Australian Defence Force covers up investigations into breaches of discipline. Our advice to the ADF would be to report publicly every such investigation as well as the proceedings and results of military tribunals. The media would very quickly choke on their chook food.

There are some 75,000 regular and reserve personnel in the ADF subject to two sets of laws, military and civil. This represents more people than attended a recent one day cricket match at the MCG. Over a ten hour period, 250 were ejected for bad behaviour and 23 were arrested. There has been no call for the details of these individuals to be released to the media which nevertheless wants to make a major case over the alleged misbehaviour of a smaller group of soldiers and sailors over a period of months. There is a double standard here.

The conduct of people in the ADF is a cut above that of the community from which it is drawn. They are not robots and their behaviour will never be and humanly cannot be always perfect. Australians are entitled to wonder whether the media's real interest is in the sex, headline-making scandal or an excessive dependence upon leaks and official handouts.

(The foregoing item was sent as a letter to the editor of *The Australian* in response to an editorial insisting on the media's right to be informed of all the details of the investigation into events involving ADF personnel and alleged to have occurred on Christmas Island. Needless to say, the letter was not published.) ●

The Chinese obsession

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs recently 'celebrated' the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. Fulsome statements were accompanied by receptions and all the usual diplomatic gala events.

The only problem was that Australia established diplomatic relations with China 60 years ago at the beginning of the Pacific War. Indeed, there were Chinese consuls in Australia - accredited to the British government - even before Federation 100 years ago.

In the same vein, a recent book *Facing North* - sponsored by the department - struggles to avoid admitting that, for years, Australia had an embassy to China in Taipei following the retreat of the Nationalist government to Taiwan in 1949. The book does, however, condemn the Nationalists for all sorts of moral inadequacies without commenting on the Communist regime's bloodstained history. Why this rewriting of history?

Perhaps the department is terrorised by possible Chinese reactions to even a suspicion that Australia may be thinking of reneging on its commitment to recognising Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan. Or perhaps the department believes that Chinese history dates only from 1949? ●

Who did win the war in Afghanistan?

The question arises from a statement in a respected national newspaper that aerial bombing 'won' the war in Afghanistan.

For a start, the assumption that the war has been won is highly dubious. Fighting between various factions continues and the current regime ruling the country does so in name only. It is far too early to declare the war won simply because the war correspondents have gone off to their next assignment.

Apart from the fact that air power has never won a war (while it has certainly enhanced the ability to win), the bulk of the fighting in Afghanistan against the Taliban and its al-Qa'eda allies was carried out by a coalition of factional militias supported - and to some extent unified - by Western advisers.

The challenge now is to stabilise Afghanistan, a civil as much as military task. But who can - or will - do it? The United Nations has no capacity and no money. The United States, Britain and Australia, the main contributors to the recent conflict, have no wish to become bogged down in a highly tribalist Muslim country. Other wealthy Western nations are showing typical reluctance while the other major aid donor, Japan, clearly has little confidence in Afghanistan's future stability. Other Muslim countries such as Turkey are willing enough but lack the financial resources.

Australia, very properly, has declined to commit any but the most limited numbers of peacekeepers and these will almost certainly be technical troops - medical, engineering and the like. Apart from the fact that we don't have enough troops to make any significant commitment, the prime minister told the UN Security Council last week that other UN members and the world body itself must do more. ●

Adding value - war by proxy

The Western operations in Afghanistan - and now in The Philippines - signal a new role for the more sophisticated military forces of countries such as the United States and Australia.

Those operations were marked by the involvement of advanced air power and special forces on the ground. The air forces are used for precision attacks on the enemy's military infrastructure - including the destruction of any hostile air capability - and the interdiction of logistic support.

As well as the normal special forces roles of intelligence gathering and target designation, these are used as trainers and advisers for indigenous forces. In particular, they introduce these forces to some of the products of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs. While many are what in the West are now regarded as basic items - night vision equipment, for example - they add substantial combat advantage over low technology opposition forces. ●

Minesweeper project almost complete

The remaining two vessels of a six ship order for advanced minesweepers are in the water and will be delivered to the RAN this year. Built in ADI's Newcastle (NSW) facility, the project is said to be on time and on budget.

According to Tasman Economics, the A\$1 billion project contributed almost A\$900 million to Australia's GDP and generated more than 3000 jobs in the industrially depressed Hunter region over the life of the project.

Local firms subcontracting to ADI have gained from technology transfers and improved management practices.

The big question for ADI and the region now is what happens next. While there are further naval projects in the construction pipeline, these will not only face competition from other parts of the industry but possible delays enforced by the switch to expanded operations within a fixed defence budget. ●

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