

# Dangers every bit as great:

## Remodelling the paradigms of Australian strategic policy debate

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In an address to the national summit on *Australia's Relations with Asia* in Old Parliament House on 13 August 2004, Professor Paul Dibb remarked that dealing with terrorism is a police matter, not a military one. Those who claim that the strategic environment has fundamentally changed are quite mistaken, he argued. Al Qa'eda and its ilk are a problem, but as threats go they are simply not in the same league as the old Soviet Union.

Philip Bobbitt, in his acclaimed study of war and peace, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, sees the matter differently. He argues that the dangers which have arisen in recent years are every bit as great as those we have just faced down. They are all the more so for being of a different nature to the threats faced down in the Cold War and characterised by unprecedented uncertainty.

Bobbitt argues that the new dangers will compel profound reassessments of the nature of 'national' security itself and, with it, the civil laws, force structures and rules of engagement that buttress such security. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that unless such changes begin, in anticipation of what could now happen at any time, we could face a catastrophic breakdown in global order.

To see why he believes all these things—and believed them before the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States shook up so many people's views of global security—requires plunging into the profound rethinking of the course of modern history that his book embodies.

It has been greeted by those best placed to assess it as a masterpiece for our times. In the words of Professor Sir Michael Howard, it will surely rank as one of the most important works on international relations published during the last fifty years. It offers what William Shawcross has greeted as an awe-inspiring survey of the roots of strategic thinking, international law and the constitutional structure of states over the past five hundred years.

As Michael Howard remarked, in his Foreword, it is a remarkable and perhaps unique book. 'There have been many studies of the development of warfare, even more of the history of international relations, while those on international and constitutional law are literally innumerable. But I know of none that has dealt with all three of these together, analysed their interaction throughout European history, and used that analysis to describe the world in which we live and the manner in which it is likely to develop'.

There are three central premises to Bobbitt's argument, from which he draws four powerful inferences. The first premise is that modern history is best understood as a series of epochal wars that have shaped both state constitutions and the international society of states. The second premise is that strategy, law (both constitutional and international) and history (as a study) are inextricably intertwined, since they shape one another. Properly speaking, none can be understood without close reference to the others. The third premise is that the state is not withering away, but nation-states are turning into market-states, which have a different constitutional and strategic logic than nation-states.

Bobbitt's first premise is grounded in a view of history that goes back via Hobbes and Machiavelli to Thucydides. Indeed, he opens his argument with the claim that Thucydides was the first to write the history of an epochal war, when he realised, in 413 BC, or shortly thereafter, that the struggle between Athens and Sparta was not merely a series of wars but a prolonged, fundamental conflict, which would shape the whole future of the Greek world. 'So it is with all epochal wars', he asserts, '—the Hundred Years' War, the Thirty Years' War, the Punic Wars—and so it will be seen of the war of the twentieth century'.

'Epochal wars', he writes, 'put the constitutional basis of the participants in play and do not truly end until the underlying constitutional questions are resolved'. From this premise he derives his first inference. 'We should regard the conflicts now commonly called the First World War, the Second World War, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as the Bolshevik Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and the Cold War as a single war', he infers, 'because all were fought over a single set of constitutional issues that were strategically unresolved until the end of the Cold War and the Peace of Paris in 1990'.

That single war, which Bobbitt dubs the Long War, was fought to determine which form of constitution—liberal parliamentary, fascist or communist—would replace the imperial states of Europe that had emerged after the epochal war of the Napoleonic period and had dominated the world between the Congress of Vienna and August 1914. This competition was itself triggered, he argues, by the instability of two imperial states—Germany and Russia—which morphed into the fascist and communist forms that the liberal democracies then had to master in order to survive.

He sees this process as rigorously analogous to earlier epochal struggles, which shaped the emergence and fate

of princely states, kingly states and territorial states between the 16th and 19th centuries. Just as earlier epochal wars were resolved by major international settlements—Westphalia, Utrecht and Vienna—so the Long War was resolved by the 1990 Peace of Paris. This settlement, setting the seal on the victory of the liberal parliamentary nation-state over fascism and communism, encouraged Francis Fukuyama to declare the ‘end of history’.

Bobbitt offers a more challenging and realistic appraisal of what had actually happened and a far more complex prognosis as to what possible futures we now face. At the heart of his prognosis is the claim that, having resolved the great constitutional issue of the 20th century that had divided them, nation-states of the early 21st century are ‘uncertain as to how to configure, much less deploy, their armed forces’. The uncertainty has arisen, because the traditional answers depended ‘on certain assumptions about the relationship between the state and its objectives that the end of this long conflict has cast in doubt’.

This brings us to Bobbitt’s second premise: that strategy, law (both constitutional and international) and history (as a study) are inextricably intertwined, since they reciprocally shape one another. It is most concisely stated as follows:

‘The state exists by virtue of its purposes, and among these are a drive for survival and freedom of action, which is strategy; for authority and legitimacy, which is law; for identity, which is history’. Law cannot come into being until the state secures a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Strategy cannot be formulated unless law prevails, for in its absence there is only civil war or banditry. ‘Yet the legitimacy necessary for law and for strategy derives from history, the understanding of past practices that characterizes a particular society’.

The most important thing about this premise is his second inference: that the key technologies produced by the Long War—weapons of mass destruction, information technology and global communications—are undermining the very possibility of nation-states in the 20th century sense. Just as surely as cannon and muskets in an earlier era undermined the possibility of principalities and feudal baronies, these technologies, he argues, began to undermine the nation-state at just the point when its liberal parliamentary form had triumphed over its darker rivals for primacy.

They render it increasingly difficult for the nation state to maintain the kind of sovereignty by which it was defined. They render the defence and governance of territories and populations increasingly problematic. They do so by creating threats which transcend borders or territorial conflict; by creating economies that transcend any national base; and by making possible histories which the nation-state cannot master through the control of information.

This brings us to Bobbitt’s third premise: that the state is not withering away. Nation states are turning into market-states which have a different constitutional and strategic

logic than nation-states. They have their roots in the liberal parliamentary nation-state, but are being forced to evolve under the above pressures and there are decidedly different ways in which things might turn out. One thing which will differentiate them will be the capacity they exhibit to reshape their military and security forces for what Paul Bracken, writing in 1993, called ‘an entirely new operational environment, taking account of revolutionary changes in military technology and the possible appearance of entirely new kinds of competitors’.

What all variants of the market-state will discover to their cost, according to Bobbitt, is that the permeability of borders due to the uncontrollability of capital flows and of information, combined with the social consequences of these developments, the novel dangers posed by weapons of mass destruction in many more hands and forms than during the Cold War, environmental and viral hazards, the difficulties in managing consensus or marshalling resources for strategic purposes and the unrelenting nature of economic competition require new ways of thinking about what they themselves are and how they must cooperate.

It is these considerations that give Bobbitt his third and fourth inferences. The third inference is that the old strategic

paradigm of threat, deterrence and retaliation must be replaced by a new one based on vulnerability, pre-emption and resilience. This will require fundamental rethinking of strategic doctrine, force structures and international law. Such rethinking has barely begun, but must accelerate or be overtaken by events in possibly catastrophic ways. The fourth inference is that international institutions, now in large measure discredited, will be necessary, but will have to be transformed or reinvented if they are to play the constructive role required of them.

Stated broadly in this manner, these inferences of Bobbitt’s may seem quite common fare. Certainly, variations of them have been in circulation for some time. What he has put together, however, is a powerful synthesis, with historical and conceptual roots that give it considerably more leverage than other, more superficial reflections along similar lines. Taken together with his other premises and inferences, these elements of his worldview offer, I suggest, quite a powerful set of lenses through which to re-examine both recent developments and future prospects.

Bobbitt called his Postscript, the only part of his book written after 9/11, ‘The Indian Summer’. The phrase, he wrote, ‘usually evokes a pleasant sensation of warm autumn weather that gives us a second chance to do what winter will make impossible’. Its origin, however, ‘is more menacing. The early American settlers were often forced to take shelter in stockades to protect themselves from attacks by tribes of Native Americans. These tribes went into winter quarters once autumn came, allowing the settlers to return to their farms. If there was a break in the approaching winter—a few days, or weeks of warm summery climate—then the tribal attacks would be resumed,

and the defenseless settlers became their prey. Once again, the settlers were forced to band together or to become victims, attacked one by one’.

He went on to argue that we are now in such an Indian summer and must look to our defences. If these first attacks ‘inspire us now to deal realistically and creatively’ with the emerging dangers of the 21st century, then the sacrifice of thousands on 9/11 could yet be turned to our common advantage. But if we disregard the implications of those attacks, he warned, we could find ourselves confronted by ‘a world-rending cataclysm’ as global institutions fracture, states lapse into turmoil, weapons of mass destruction proliferate and are used, and civil law is warped by fear into new authoritarian forms. For, he concluded, ‘we are entering a fearful time, a time that will call on all our resources, moral as well as intellectual and material’.

Why does he apprehend such a cataclysm? First, because, in his own words, ‘War is not a pathology that, with proper hygiene and treatment, can be wholly prevented. War is a natural condition of the state, which was organised in order to be an effective instrument of violence on behalf of society ... On 11 September 2001, the nascent community of market-states came to this knowledge as every society that preceded it has: through violence’. Second, because the nature of the war that hit home that day is something existing laws and strategic doctrines are not equipped to deal with. Third, because the cascading consequences of not being so equipped could trigger crises far worse than most people can readily imagine.

Immediately after 9/11 and for some time thereafter there was a vigorous debate about whether it should be responded to as a crime or an act of war. Bobbitt is not in doubt that it was an act of war. The problem is that it was not an act of war by a nation-state and therefore put customary usage of the laws and machinery of war out of their reckoning. Al Qa’eda is a virtual state, not a territorial one, not a nation-state, ‘which means that our classical strategies of deterrence based on retaliation will have to be rethought’. They cannot be effective in these circumstances, because ‘what threatens the states of the world now is too easy to disguise and too hard to locate’.

We are, Bobbitt believes, on the cusp of a new epoch of war, the nature of which will confound those who think of war merely along the lines given by 20th century experience. The liberalism that emerged triumphant from the 20th century will have to reshape itself to cope with what is coming and most of its citizenry are unprepared for what this will entail. Their very concepts of security are outmoded and confused. Most fundamentally, ‘National security will cease to be defined in terms of borders alone, because both the links among societies as well as the attacks on them exist in psychological and infrastructural dimensions, not on an invaded plain marked by the seizure and holding of territory.’

‘In such a world’, Bobbitt tells us, ‘we must move our thinking from threat-based strategies that rely on knowing precisely who our enemy is and where he lives, to vulnerability-based strategies that try to make our infrastructure more slippery, more redundant, more versatile, more difficult to attack. ... There will be no final victory in such a war. Rather, victory will consist in having the resources and the ingenuity to avoid defeat. So long, however, as states rely on a deterrence and retaliation model for their strategic paradigms—that is, a model that requires a threat-based analysis—they will inevitably neglect those steps, including enhanced intelligence collection, pre-emption, the development of defensive systems (including sensors), vaccinations, the pre-positioning of medical supplies and advanced methods of deception, that provide the basis for operating within a different paradigm, one that relies on a vulnerability analysis’.

Against such a background, what are we to make of the strategic policy debate in Australia? First, that the debate looks narrow and ill-informed against the deeper conceptual understanding of world affairs Bobbitt provides. Second that those who continue to defend the old strategic doctrine, Paul Dibb most of all, appear to dismiss with scorn even preliminary

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attempts to rethink matters. They need to be confronted by something as formidable as Bobbitt’s thesis in

order to be forced into a serious debate. Third, that, while some tinkering with the force structure has taken place in the past four years, it would appear to have taken place on an improvised basis, an ad hoc basis, not on the basis of deep and consequential thought.

Australia is a nation-state evolving into a market-state for the reasons identified by Bobbitt. As much as any such state, though with our own peculiar variations on the common themes, we are becoming more and more implicated in world order and global infrastructure security challenges, less and less likely to be threatened by conventional territorial invasion. Yet the Defence of Australia doctrine still postulates territorial defence and denial of the so-called sea-air gap to a notional major adversary as its absolutely central priorities. Those priorities take the lion’s share of defence spending allocations.

Even as our actual military and security commitments more and more resemble those that Bobbitt’s worldview would anticipate, the defenders of the old doctrine insist that nothing fundamental has changed and that, in Hugh White’s words, we must still be prepared to fight conventional nation-state wars. It is not necessary to postulate that such wars will not occur in order to see that, as a matter of practical reality, they are extremely unlikely to occur in ways that directly threaten Australian sovereignty in the conventional sense of the term.

Australia is faced by growing problems in maintaining its defence force, because of budgetary constraints. The expensive nature of contemporary

advanced platforms and the lure of the marketplace on Service personnel both contribute to this budgetary squeeze. The contradiction between a force structure configured for continental defence in depth, and the realities of constant overseas deployments requiring more and different capabilities than have been developed under the existing doctrine, exacerbate funding problems. All of this was true in the 1990s. The emerging strategic environment of terrorist threats and economic volatility has accentuated these problems. Yet still we are told that the force structure must be essentially maintained as it is.

Bobbitt's paradigm and his scenarios would have us thinking long and hard about what our vulnerabilities are, instead of what threats we face; about how resilient we can make ourselves, rather than about how we can retaliate against some notional conventional aggressor; about how we can best contribute to the security of international economic and informational infrastructure, participate in pre-empting emerging dangers and build new alliances against unconventional dangers, rather than about whether we can blast an imagined conventional enemy out of the so-called sea-air gap between our northern shores and the archipelagoes further north.

These are fairly radical thoughts. But it is thinking that we are in need of right now. The tinkering that we have done since 2001 has been reasonably intelligent, but the paradigm seems hardly to have shifted, hardly, indeed, to have been perceived as a paradigm at all, but rather as if it were simply an unchanging reality. What has not taken place is a truly thorough, scenario-based reconsideration of the assumptions built into the Defence of Australia doctrine. If the Dibb Review made eminent sense in 1986,

because the ADF had been drifting conceptually since the end of the Vietnam War, a similarly fundamental review would now seem to be in order.

If Bobbitt is even approximately correct in his diagnosis of the new strategic environment and in his prognosis for the epochal struggle ahead between market-states and anarchic forces, we shall be compelled to undertake such a radical rethinking of our strategic policy and force structure in the not too distant future. What will it take to prompt such thinking? We have certainly had a good deal of early warning about what is brewing. But, sunk in old paradigmatic ways of seeing our security, we lumber on, tinkering and tarrying, rather than thinking hard and coherently about where we are heading. We have always had the luxury of living in a continent-sized country remote from nation-state threats. Like our rich natural resource endowment, this encourages a certain complacency that in this Indian summer we cannot afford. For the dangers that are now looming are, in their own way, every bit as great as those of the past century. We must prepare ourselves to deal with them, or run the risk of coming to grief in grimly unfamiliar ways. ♦

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### APRIL

Introduction to Radar Systems 04–06 April  
 Introduction to Project Management 07–08 April  
 Introduction to Guided Weapons 18–20 April  
 Battlefield Digitisation 27–29 April

### MAY

Introduction to Electronic Warfare 04–06 May  
 Principles of Avionics 04–06 May  
 Basic Communications Principles 09–11 May  
 Modern Communications Systems 12–13 May  
 Introduction to Systems Engineering 16–18 May  
 Software Project Management 16–18 May  
 Systems Thinking and Modelling 18–20 May  
 Systems Engineering Practice 19–20 May  
 Introduction to Aircraft Certification 25–27 May

### JUNE

Requirements Engineering 02–03 June  
 Introduction to Satellite Communications 08–10 June

### SEPTEMBER

Introduction to Guided Weapons 07–09 September  
 Systems Thinking and Modelling 26–28 September

### OCTOBER

Introduction to Systems Engineering 10–12 October  
 Systems Engineering Practice 13–14 October  
 Introduction to Project Management 24–25 October  
 Introduction to Radar Systems 25–27 October  
 Requirements Engineering 27–28 October

### NOVEMBER

System Dynamics Practicum 02–04 November  
 Software Project Management 02–04 November  
 Basic Communications Principles 21–23 November