

# Niche forces?

## First thoughts from an army perspective

**John Essex-Clark**

The phrases ‘niche force’ and ‘niche capability’ are being bandied about as a way to describe current Australian contributions to coalition operations. In a military, if not political, sense this concept may lead to the stagnation of the Army’s ability to conduct military operations.

The concept of a ‘niche force’ is founded on the notion that it is appropriate to make force contributions whose specific capabilities are disproportionate to the actual investment of resources and personnel. This approach to multinational operations is alliance policy on the cheap. It might also be seen as a morally corrupt, economically shortsighted and operationally insignificant course of action. There is a danger that we might end up being considered by the United States and Britain, not so much as staunch military friends but more as political opportunists.

We are in danger of treating our armed forces as a commodity, rather than as citizens who, by putting on uniforms, have assumed the responsibility to fight in order to uphold our national values and interests. By focusing on trading our special skills, we derogate from the moral impact of our decision to send troops into combat. We do well to consider the dictionary definition of a niche market:

A section of a market that can be highly profitable if the product supplied is specially designed to meet targeted needs; or trade or traffic especially as regards a particular commodity.

Is this the message that we want to send when we deploy our troops—that they represent a commodity in international terms and are not sent on operations as the coherent and self-contained demonstration of our national will and values?

The political and strategic rationale for being part of a coalition force in Iraq to support the national interest is reasonable. Coalition operations represent the future of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). However, the simple

reason we only sent a niche force to Iraq is that we do not have a modern conventional army capable of battlefield interoperability with our major allies. Being platform-based, the Navy and Air Force appear to be more capable of achieving interoperability with allies by the simple integration of their environmental capabilities. Land forces face the more complex task of integrating human capabilities across a broader potential range of tasks. Furthermore, we are sending a message that we do not yet possess the political will to maintain a modern army in terms of either the financial commitment required, or in terms of our willingness to accept casualties.

There are plausible reasons for the deployment of niche forces on alliance operations, particularly when the Australian contribution will be comparatively minor in relation to the American colossus. We need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of investing in operational specialisation. We also need to consider whether we run the risk of developing as a ‘boutique’ force—available for some operational tasks, but incapable of broad-spectrum tasking.

The best argument for committing niche forces to coalitions is that it enables the ADF to operate, albeit on the margins, with the most powerful military force in the world today. It also simplifies the task of negotiating the size and composition of the force contribution, particularly when the lead nation is eager to establish the operation’s legitimacy by a display of ‘flags on the ground’. As we have witnessed in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no denying that a small force has the potential to deliver high operational and political value to the coalition. That contribution can have a relatively low financial cost compared with the cost of forces needed for modern conventional warfare. Furthermore, by keeping the force small and specialised, and limiting the number of combat troops involved, the deployment of a niche force minimises the risk of casualties. There are operational advantages as well. Niche forces used at an

operational level of war gain experience in conducting low-level joint and combined operations with our major allies.

This approach would also allow uncomplicated and cheap rotation of the force if the operation were to be extended. Finally, focusing on niche capabilities reduces the costs of providing, maintaining and training a force that would be needed for a conventional war.

Most of these arguments reflect an economic or political incentive. Unfortunately, perhaps, those incentives count for little when forces end up engaged in the one conflict that no one anticipated. Cast your minds back a few years and consider which operations, in which the ADF has been involved, would have appeared likely only a year before they occurred.

Developing a niche philosophy holds particular perils for the Army. Some of these are already evident. First, if only Special Forces are used as the Army elements in a niche force, and these forces are expanded, it will drain quality and quantity from the remainder of the Army. It is doing this already. Second, the needs for special niche force training and equipment can reduce and divert resources and funds from training for conventional war. Such reduction and diversion may already be happening. Third, niche force structuring does not exercise Australian senior tactical command and control at the operational level of war. Fourth, such structuring could cause our 'principal allies', who provide the major conventional forces and therefore 'do the hard yards' and take the major casualties, covertly to disrespect the Australian niche force, though overtly praising the capabilities and actions of the force in order to satisfy political or strategic objectives. Fifth, developing a niche force structure may appear to some to dilute the requirement, and therefore the costs, for essential major military development needed to prepare for modern conventional war. Additionally, focusing on niche capabilities could diminish the scope of our 'Training for War' environment. Finally, we are in danger of creating a Defence culture of special operations to the detriment of the rest of the Army. This culture could lead to a concentration on niche operations rather than the ability to fight conventionally. Over-specialisation could lead to a further diminution in the quality and quantity of modern conventional weapons, especially in the Army, leading to further reduction of land force capabilities, and it is likely to lessen the quality of deterrence in our National Strategy.

If we are going to fly our flag with pride alongside our allies, we should establish and train a larger and more combat-effective Army in order to enable an operationally and logistically independent force to fight alongside the much larger conventional forces of our major coalition partners. In the era of network-centric warfare, the capabilities of the force—that is its firepower, manoeuvre, command and control, communications, intelligence gathering, and logistics management—must be compatible with the capabilities of our major partner. This is an expensive but morally correct and balanced option for the longer-term effectiveness and deterrent effect of the

Australian Army, and represents the only sound foundation for a firm relationship with our allies.

We need, at least, a modern conventional and fully deployable mechanised infantry brigade that can fight alongside our allies. The Army already possesses the structure. We need the modern combat and logistic equipment and technologies to make it useful as an independent tactical command within a coalition. For example, in Iraq we could have deployed elements of a cavalry regiment, plus a mechanised infantry battalion, artillery, combat engineer elements, aviation, Special Forces, and logistic support. They could have conducted reconnaissance-in-force probing missions or flank protection of the main force in the early days of the war, supported by RAAF ground attack and logistics. They could have then been used for lines of communication and area security in the latter stages of the war. Although deploying a more coherent, self-contained force would have represented a greater financial cost, it would have gained the ADF much in international dignity, and especially much-needed modern warfare experience in coalition operations. At the conclusion of operations, such a force would have had ongoing utility in the critical peace-enforcement mission that inevitably followed the combat phase. By maintaining a force commitment, Australia would not have faced the charge that it was squandering the moral (and it must be admitted, the political) capital that it had built up in assisting to overthrow the Ba'ath regime.

The choice of a 'special-to-task force' would have required the political courage and national will to have funded, developed and deployed as part of a coalition force, but it would have improved the Army's capability and morale significantly. We must consider whether this experience will become an opportunity missed or a lesson learnt.

The option of deploying a coherent, balanced and self-contained force package probably requires the ADF to access the expensive, yet highly politically attractive, modern technologies that enable network-centric warfare to operate within a coalition. However, we need not get too carried away by this prospect. Self-contained forces represent a stand-alone capability and can be employed as such. What is important is the establishment of operational synergies with alliance partners that will enable us to cooperate on the future battlefield. In pursuing the information edge over our opponents, we should not trade off the ability to manoeuvre or our capacity to apply firepower. We certainly need good intelligence and an operational capability in the 'war against terrorism' and this, correctly, is influencing much of our thinking. Nonetheless, we must be wary of being seduced by a technological ideology exaggerated by extraordinary success against an enemy such as Iraq whose forces were 'all show and no go'.

How do we determine the balance between 'brain' and 'punch', both operationally and financially? There is no doubt that the Special Forces elements of our Army should be designed and fully equipped primarily to support both

counter-terror action and conventional operations in our geographic region of interest. If we need a niche force to satisfy a political desire and special operational need within a coalition, we should use only the elements within our current capability. However, there is much thought now within some military and political circles that special niche force capabilities should be enhanced. Without a significant increase in the size of the Army and the purchase of modern equipment, such enhancement could only occur at the expense of our conventional forces combat capability. But we are told that we should 'fight better with what we have' and that no increase in the size of the ADF is necessary. However, there is a very real danger that accepting an expanded niche force concept will require us to fight better with what we have left.

Unfortunately, a niche force appears to satisfy principally the political demands of showing the flag internationally, at the lowest cost possible to gain the maximum strategic and political kudos at the expense of a real warfighting capability. If we go down this path, our Army will pay the price with the loss of its capability to operate across the full spectrum of potential operations. The principal danger of such a policy is that a slow cultural change to a belief in soft-option warfighting will result in the loss of an aggressive and powerful winning capability in real battle. The Army must remain prepared for the unforeseen—the only certainty about our next deployment is that it will be unexpected. We do not want to be in the position of going to a gunfight armed only with a knife.

How can we prevent this danger to our Army culture? Irrespective of the attractiveness of special operations niche forces, we must never lose sight of our ability to

fight alone and win. Importantly we must let our decision makers—both military and political—know precisely, accurately and irrefutably what we need if we are to maintain an essential degree of operational self-reliance. Communicating this message is a colossal and essential task for our Army's leaders. Our current Army niche forces are proven, gallant, and valuable assets but, in the end, a tough, committed and well-equipped Army is the only element of the ADF that can win a battle where the physical control of land or people is vital to success.

The Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, has made it clear that the twin challenges of operations in Australia's geographical defence and operations in Australia's interests 'that may be far-flung' must both be met and that there is no 'either-or' choice. I believe that, if we were ever to have to fight on Australian soil against a powerful opponent, we would inevitably be in a coalition with our allies. Therefore, rather than preparing to provide a niche force within a coalition, the preparation of a well-equipped modern Army that maximises the use of the available human resources remains paramount. The niche-force concept could be a serious distraction. ♦

*Brigadier John Essex-Clark, DSM, (Retd), served as a rifleman, infantry section commander, platoon sergeant, platoon commander and rifle company commander in counter-insurgency operations in the then Rhodesia, Malaya, Nyasaland and the Belgian Congo. He saw active service in South Vietnam as a battalion operations officer and commander of a combat-support company. In his post-Vietnam Army career, he commanded an infantry battalion and was commandant of both the Infantry Centre and the Army Command and Staff College.*

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