

Seapower and

joint-force synergy

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Myth constricting strategic thinking

Australians generally think they understand our past and it is often said we have been shaped by our experiences of war. But although we might be very good at tradition, we are often bad at history. We tend to focus on what we think we know and, all too frequently, we examine our defining historical moments through cultural horse-blinkers. Our culture is indelibly coloured by myths, in particular the struggle of the first European settlers with the Australian bush. Such myths tend to be more concerned with looking inwards than outwards. The problem for a maritime nation such as Australia is that in this context, the sea that surrounds us is seen as a moat and not a two-way highway.

Such images carry over to our collective wartime stories where, in the main, a single dimension of the tale obscures what were invariably complex events. If asked to list some famous battles most Australians would probably find it difficult to get past Gallipoli and Kokoda, and they would be hard-pressed to flesh out the context to these operations. Considered attempts to analyse how sea and air power have shaped our military campaigns are almost unheard of outside staff colleges or strategic policy conferences.

Myth to stove-piped thinking

Even our most recent operations under the full glare of the modern media have generally been either misinterpreted or viewed through a single-Service lens. We also rarely hear in the media, academia or from defence industry interests that the defence force as a whole has a capability gap. Too often the claim is simply made that one Service or another is the 'Cinderella' of the force.

Notwithstanding the ADF's achievements over the last 20 years in becoming a truly joint force, there remains a dangerous tendency to view the unique but synergistic contributions of the three Services as separate and disconnected endeavours. No one credibly suggests that in a small defence force we can afford to duplicate capabilities unnecessarily across each Service but this is not the ADF's intention. Instead we seek to provide complementary capabilities which can work

together as part of a mutually supportive system of systems. Without this mutual support, no single capability will ever see its potential maximised.

There appears to be a fundamental community misunderstanding of the nature of modern joint combat power. The INTERFET deployment to East Timor in 1999 provides an example where some have since argued that cover by (Australian, British and US) air warfare destroyers was unnecessary as our fighters would have quickly cleared the skies of any air threat that appeared. But even in relatively nearby East Timor, aircraft from Australian bases would have worked best as part of systems already and permanently on the spot. On the surface this is not a difficult concept to grasp, but in the arguments over future defence force acquisitions and force transformation this aspect is regularly ignored outside the modern ADF.

In a situation such as East Timor, our FA-18 fighters, or in the future their joint strike fighter replacements, would only have succeeded if properly integrated with other capabilities. In East Timor this role would have fallen almost exclusively to the coalition's air defence ships. These vessels, which operate with their own organic sensors, weapons, and command systems, possessed the ability to control, direct, and as necessary offer third-party protection; and not just to friendly aircraft.

The overall point here is that highly capable naval forces provide essential elements in littoral operations. We know that the INTERFET elements ashore in East Timor were mainly lodged, equipped, and sustained from the sea. The overall force's initial success also owed much to the robust protective umbrella provided by its sea-based elements, as well as the potent strike elements on alert in Australia. From the very start of the operation it was apparent that INTERFET had the power to control the sea surface, the water mass below, the airspace above, the nearby coastal land, and the electromagnetic spectrum. In effect, INTERFET controlled the joint battle-space.

In consequence, General Cosgrove knew that he was relatively safe from external interference. Confident in this protection, INTERFET's land forces were able to concentrate on getting their job done. The likelihood of such interference

is not the issue. Rather, it is that INTERFET's success ashore was underpinned by the possession of maritime assets fully able to cope with a multi-dimensional threat.

Sea power enabling jointery

Notwithstanding differences of scale, similar conclusions may be drawn from our recent operations in the Solomons and the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the simple truth is that almost every military operation Australia has ever undertaken has been fundamentally joint – even if not always jointly Australian. Even when not obviously or actively engaged, sea power has invariably been an operational enabler of the first order. Much the same can be said about the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars.

Such observations on sea power are hardly new. With apologies to this year's 200th anniversary of Trafalgar—it was blockade, not sea battle that provided the Royal Navy's main strategic weapon in the Napoleonic era. As Admiral Mahan once recounted, it was Nelson's 'far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which Napoleon's army never looked', which stood between it and world dominion.

Then there is maritime manoeuvre. With the battle of Agincourt in 1415 English sea power triumphed over heavily armoured French knights because it was the mobility conferred by the English Navy that enabled the strategic and operational deployment of the better remembered Welsh archers. Most histories also forget to mention that whenever the English attempted to take an overland route through France, their expeditions invariably ended in failure. Not for nothing did the 18th century author Sir Thomas Molyneux, call a well-prepared joint littoral operation: 'a terrible sort of war'. Terrible that is for your opponent. In what was one of the earliest complete works on joint warfare, Molyneux continued: 'happy for that people who are sovereigns enough of the sea to put it into execution! For it comes like thunder and lightning to some unprepared part of the world'.

As an island nation, every Australian military operation overseas has been expeditionary. Yet, while much has been written on the activities of the first and second AIF, and their battles in Europe and the Middle East respectively, far less attention is given to how they got and stayed there. Our historians tend to ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of men were safely convoyed over vast distances and then sustained overseas for years at a time.

The battle between HMAS *Sydney* and the *Emden* in 1915 is often simply described as 'our first naval victory'. For the public visiting the Australian War Memorial, or reading a coffee-table book, this may be sufficient, but such analysis barely scratches the surface. *Sydney* was simply doing the job for which she had been designed. Tens, if not hundreds, of other allied ships were employed around the globe on equally important tasks. The destruction of *Emden* was undoubtedly a victory, but it was only one step in the ongoing campaign to prevent the Germans from threatening our sea communications.

Kokoda, and the successful campaign to recapture New Guinea from the Japanese in World War II, is likewise not just a story of hellish jungle fighting. To understand the campaign we must also study the far longer, and far broader narrative, of how allied naval and air power fought for control of the sea.

We forget, to our future peril, that our critical vulnerability in 1942 was not the enemy's possession of the island arc to our north, but the potential loss of the oceanic supply lines from, to and around Australia, especially those from the continental United States.

Without the defeat of the enemy's attack upon our shipping, there would have been no allied campaigns anywhere in the Pacific, or anywhere in the world for that matter. The surface, underwater and air threats to our communications were real and potent. Of course the flip side of the coin is equally worthy of our attention. While the Japanese maintained control of the sea, they held the strategic initiative. But, as allied submarine and air strength grew; it became possible to disrupt and eventually cut Japan's own operational and strategic supply lines.

In the nine months between December 1942 and September 1943, for example, the Japanese managed to get just 3500 tons of supplies to their land forces in New Guinea. The allies on the other hand, moved more than 55,000 tons to forward areas in June 1943 alone. In September, this had increased to more than 200,000 tons. The same pattern was either repeated or improved upon throughout the remainder of the Pacific war. The allies chose not to fight a prolonged war of attrition. Instead they used joint forces to project power from the sea against an already weakened and often starving enemy. Amphibious manoeuvre allowed the allies to take only the positions they needed. Wherever possible, Japanese strong points were bypassed, isolated and allowed to wither on the vine.

Sixty years ago Australian forces were engaged in the landing at Balikpapan in Borneo. It was the last major allied joint campaign of the war, our largest amphibious attack ever and a great operational success. But, like all such operations before and since, it was only possible because maritime supremacy had already been achieved. If we are truly interested in learning from our history, rather than simply commemorating it, we must appreciate that the Japanese were defeated, not because we and our allies were individually better than our opponents, but because we were part of a successful, global maritime strategy.

Our tradition of alliances with great sea powers has been Australia's greatest good fortune. To use Dr John Reeve's useful description, we have been full card-carrying members of 'the lucky league'. When this maritime alliance has maintained command of the sea, we have prospered, when command has been temporarily lost, we have suffered. Compare Tobruk in 1941, with Singapore in 1942. On both occasions our soldiers had their backs to the sea and had lost all their local air support. But in 1941, despite the enemy's greater strength, the besieged forces could still be supplied and supported. By contrast, in 1942 our strategic links to Singapore were broken, and our troops were compelled to surrender to a numerically weaker opponent.

In achieving sea control Australia has usually operated as a junior partner but this has not always been the case. We have all heard much about the planning and practical failures of the Gallipoli campaign. However, six months before Gallipoli, in September 1914, the Australian naval and military expeditionary force successfully occupied German New Guinea. This was Australia's first true joint and combined operation, and the first where in modern parlance

we acted as the lead nation. Like the operation in East Timor 85 years later, it was a classic example of how, within our region, sea power is essential to the effective achievement of our strategic aims.

Where might we be now if, in place of Gallipoli, the capture of German New Guinea had become the focus of our national legends. Instead, at a time when many believed war was some necessary rite of national passage, a bloody and ultimately pointless failure replaced a stunning and almost bloodless success in Australia's collective memory. In German New Guinea, it was largely the overwhelming armament of the battlecruiser *Australia* that projected the desired effect ashore. In the first few days off East Timor the Aegis cruiser USS *Mobile Bay* achieved a comparable effect. As part of the INTERFET coalition we were extremely fortunate to have had access to her warfighting and battlespace management capabilities. Whether we can always place such reliance on our friends' availability is another matter. Coalitions work best when the partners bring everything they need, at least to some degree.

Strengthening Australian seapower

That great continental strategist Napoleon never really understood sea power, except insofar as he always recognised that it was the Royal Navy that blocked his wider strategic ambitions. One of his commander's maxims, however, was '... never do what the enemy wishes you to do'. The reason, he believed, is because the enemy would prefer that you deploy in an area that he has already reconnoitred, studied, and probably fortified.

In preparing for military operations we seek to create an advantage over any potential rival, avoiding their strengths, probing their weaknesses, and doing what they do not expect. At the same time, we must expect that those who might wish us harm will be doing the same. In an era of evolving threats, our ability to exploit our influence at sea, and from the sea, will be vital to acquiring ascendancy. It will not be enough to have merely the technical capabilities. We must also have professional and motivated men and women who understand their operational environment better than anyone else.

Notwithstanding the introduction of new technologies, the appearance of new threats and the changes we have seen in global affairs, the protection of Australian citizens and Australian national interests will in future still fall squarely on the shoulders of rapidly deployable maritime forces. Certainly, the extensive deployment of our Navy has shown no signs of decreasing. In recent years, a succession of real-world crises has seen our ships and our sailors at the forefront of Australia's response. In the Southern Ocean, the Solomons, Iraq and Aceh, we have used our capabilities at sea and in the air to project our national power and influence.

An important pointer to the future is that, as well as being local *and* distant, these crises have stretched across the operational spectrum. They have ranged from conflict and peace enforcement, through to disaster relief and sovereignty protection. All have made extensive use of our naval capabilities to enable a joint operation. Australia's vision for the ADF is, and must continue to be, a truly joint,

self-deployable, mobile force, able to work as one to control the sea, air and land environments.

This vision demonstrates that we are serious about Australia's role in the region and further afield. It is for this reason that the new air warfare destroyers and amphibious ships are absolutely vital to the future of both the Navy and the ADF. These ships will mean that, whether we are acting independently, or in coalition, we will be bringing everything we need to the fray. We must also keep in mind that this aspect of sea power and our maritime strategy still reflects only a portion of the larger picture.

The Navy is a professional military force but it is not concerned solely with warfighting. Sea power also contributes in a positive and enduring way to Australia's diplomatic, technological and industrial strengths. Throughout our history the Navy has been both the servant and friend of our society, and we need to broaden this appreciation. Australia is a maritime nation within a maritime region. If we wish to remain a dynamic and functioning player, then far more needs to be done to explore all aspects of our national relationship with the sea. This should include the inter-relationship between the economic and physical dimensions, and the integrated protection of the whole.

Our surrounding oceans are fundamental to Australia's economic well being. Sea transport remains essential to our trade and the value of our maritime industries continues to increase. However pollution, over-exploitation, crime, terrorism and other types of disorder have the potential to threaten this vital resource. We already have jurisdiction over a 200nm exclusive economic zone; an enormous area of ocean, larger than our land territory. As a former Commander Australian Theatre, Commander Northern Command and Director-General Coastwatch, I know that keeping watch and responding over this expanse is a huge task. Yet, for all this effort, our sovereign waters are not a moat and can never be isolated from the broader maritime common.

The Navy, supported by elements across the ADF, already plays a key role in enforcing the rule of law in our maritime zones and in protecting our offshore resources. But if in reality it is the entire ocean that must be sustained and protected, then how should this be done? Obviously it will not be a purely military task but if the past is any guide the Navy is destined to play a major role, and it would be far better if it was the Navy setting the course for its contribution.

There are countless similar questions still to be asked. Finding the right answers will be fundamental to securing the Navy's future as an integral and specialist component of a jointly-focused and configured defence force. A force where all the elements are mutually supportive and can systematically communicate with and otherwise support each other. This means we should strive to nurture a unique naval vision that gains strength from this joint understanding, and is not afraid to go further so we can address the challenges of an uncertain security environment. ♦

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