

# Defence capability review:

## a summary

**Trevor J Thomas**

On 7 November 2003 the Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Hill, confirmed the Government's response to the Defence Capability Review (DCR), which had been underway since late 2002. The Minister pitched his announcement as an 'interim' response to the Government's fuller expression of the whole revised 2003–2013 Defence Capability Plan (DCP), which is expected to be publicly released by the second quarter of 2004. He has also stressed that new capability decisions to date sought to embody the themes reflected in the 2000 Defence White Paper and Defence Update 2003 (released in February 2003), as well as lessons from recent ADF operational experiences in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In announcing the first tranche of DCR decisions, Senator Hill also noted that in undertaking the review the Government had drawn heavily on the advice of the Chief of Defence Force and the Service Chiefs. Such an utterance would be unsurprising in most comparable Western countries. In the Australian context it reflects almost a revolutionary change. In recent times, more often than not, strategic advice to government has been the jealously guarded preserve of the upper echelons of Australia's large civilian defence bureaucracy.

As an 'interim' measure, there is obviously more to come as the next federal budget (covering the 2004–05 financial year) is framed in the months running up to Budget night on 11 May 2004. Senator Hill noted that, in this process, the Government needed 'to factor in important developments of the last few years, in particular, global terrorism, [the] proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and some deteriorating circumstances within our own region. We also needed to factor in the experiences of [the] high operational tempo of recent times'.

In releasing the DCR the Minister acknowledged it was 'three years on from the 2000 Defence White Paper and the [then] DCP attached to it, (and had incorporated) more mature costings in relation to some projects, particularly projects that were some years out' in terms of timing, in the first DCP. 'We therefore said that we would do a review

of the DCP, and hoped to have that concluded in October. It's still not quite complete, but nevertheless, the Government has taken a number of decisions this week'.

### Where is the money coming from?

In terms of funding undertakings for new capability acquisitions coming out of the DCR, Senator Hill stated 'we developed this project on a budget-neutral basis, recognising that we're receiving a three per cent real increase per year. Because only seven years of the ten years remain, we've taken it out an extra three years. So the new DCP, when it's released, will be for a 10-year block again—basically starting from this year. And with the savings that we were able to make, and with some improvement of projects—that's some of the detail that we're settling at the moment—it's obviously our view that we can achieve these outcomes within the budget'.

Senator Hill's comments therefore sought to address early scepticism concerning the DCR, which has centred on the validity of the Government's confidence that the revised DCP, or indeed any effective modernisation of the ADF, can be achieved without a larger real increase in defence funding. In coverage since the review announcement, few commentators believe it can, especially if our strategic circumstances continue to deteriorate and the ADF is forced to maintain a high operational tempo. Accordingly, the overly optimistic financial management habits of the 1980s and 1990s, when Australia's strategic situation was relatively benign, are proving hard for many to shake.

### A 'sea change' for the ADF

At the DCR announcement Senator Hill acknowledged he is unlikely to be the responsible minister when some of the critical capability funding decisions in the later parts of the program would be required to be taken. He claimed, however, some provision for this had already been built

into the plan, given close to \$A1 billion of approved funds remain unspent (and are being held by the Department of Finance in a special drawing account). According to Senator Hill, 'provided the government is prepared to reschedule money that it is anticipated to spend in the first few years for the tasks further out, [the DCP] should be adequately covered, and (in the past) the government has been prepared to do that'.

At the heart of the shift in ADF operational focus recognised in the DCR is a big emphasis on developing a joint-force approach, rather than three interrelated Service-centric ones, under what Senator Hill describes as 'rebalancing' of overall defence capabilities. This is the first step in a wholesale shift by the ADF involving:

- adapting the Navy's prime function of open-sea, maritime warfare to make it a force better honed to operate away from Australia or in support of amphibious operations (also involving land forces);
- better integrating land forces into Australia's overall maritime defence strategy through modernising and hardening various land force elements and integrating them with maritime, air transport and strike elements;
- relying on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) for the bulk of future broad-area maritime surveillance; and
- moving away from specialised, manned platforms for long-range strike to 'new generation' missiles on a range of platforms.

Rather than being this specific, the Defence Minister, instead, preferred to describe the shift in DCR outcomes via deference to the conclusions of Defence Update 2003, which more specifically noted global terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and instances of regional deterioration now demanded new prominence in the ADF's frontline capability. Senator Hill nevertheless conceded the DCR process had identified 'an increased requirement to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of the Army, to provide air defence protection to deploying forces, to enhance the lift requirement for deployments, and to position the Australian Defence Force to exploit current and emerging Network Centric Warfare advantages'.

## Enhancing the ability to operate in the region

The DCR has therefore re-emphasised the Government's desire to ensure an ability to safely deploy, lodge and sustain Australian forces offshore. This means Australian forces need to be better protected, with Senator Hill stating, 'we do see the threat that's associated with long-range missiles launched from the air as a growing threat. And we see no other alternative, in order that we are able to answer that threat, but to move to this new capability'. As such, the government has accepted advice to strengthen the Navy's defensive air warfare capability.

The RAN lost its area air warfare capability when the last of the three 1960s vintage Charles F. Adams-class guided missile destroyers (DDG) was retired in 2001. Under the DCR this essential capability is now to be regained from

2013, with the construction (preferably in Australia) and delivery into service of the first of three new Air Warfare Destroyers (AWD). Navy insiders apparently prefer the nomenclature—Sea Control Combatant or Air Warfare Capable Destroyer—to emphasise the vessels are multi-functional not unitary platforms and will therefore be capable of a broad range of military, constabulary and diplomatic tasks.

Through the DCR the Government has further agreed that such vessels will be equipped with a US-designed combat system, most likely to be a variant of the Lockheed Martin Aegis system—said by the Minister to be able to track or simultaneously destroy numbers of aircraft or missiles at ranges in excess of 150 kilometres. Initially, this decision appears to be using the same SM2 missile proposed for incremental upgrades to four existing guided missile frigates (FFG), although Senator Hill latterly confirmed 'there is the possibility in the future for upgrading to that type of capability (SM3), if the need is there'.

In anointing the Aegis system, the Government has apparently decided to limit options to American systems for interoperability purposes and to avoid another technological orphan of the type that have bedevilled Australia with other 'adapted' projects. Senator Hill considered the decision to limit combat system choice to US air warfare systems, probably mean 'a derivative of the Aegis system, but there are some other possibilities in that regard, and work has already commenced on an examination of those alternatives'. The Minister further confirmed adherence to the original project schedule (first ship ready in 2013) saying, 'the timelines we have for these ships are really quite demanding, but we're going to make every endeavour to stick to those time lines. It'll mean decisions in relation to designers will have to be settled in the very near future.' Senator Hill added, 'while not surprisingly they (AWD) were a little more expensive than what we might have first thought, we have factored that into the revised (capability) plan'.

Responding to media questioning regarding the need for a new air warfare destroyer, the Senator replied 'they're not commonplace, but they're becoming more commonplace. As you know, apart from the Americans now, the Japanese have them, the Korean's are getting them, the Spanish have got them, and the Norwegians have got them. I think they're becoming really an essential and affordable capability, and that's why we have firmed-up on that decision.' The decision is fully consistent with the overall thrust of the DCR. Few serious defence commentators question the need for a strategically and operationally mobile ADF to have some ability to flexibly operate outside the range of shore-based air cover.

In terms of the current program to improve the war-fighting capability of Australia's guided missile frigate (FFG) fleet, the Government has decided the SM1 missile defence capability of the four youngest vessels (*Sydney*, *Darwin*, *Melbourne* and *Newcastle*) will be upgraded by the installation of SM2 missiles by 2007 (at an estimated

cost of \$A500m). Such an approach can at best only offer an interim solution as the FFG do not currently possess a 3-D radar fit to fully utilise the SM2 in an area air defence role. According to Senator Hill, 'whilst recognising that upgrading the SM1 missiles to SM2 versions on the FFG is a challenging project, we're going to apply it to four of the FFG to provide an interim capability towards the introduction of new air warfare destroyers'.

Corresponding savings offsets will see the two oldest FFG (*Adelaide* and *Canberra*) paid off from 2006, when the last of the eight new Anzac-class frigates is scheduled to be delivered.

## Big improvements to amphibious and sealift capacity

The East Timor deployment in 1999, although relatively close to Australia, is acknowledged by many as demonstrating the clear need for the ADF to be much better prepared to operate in our region. Even though it helped when *Kanimbla* and *Manoora* subsequently came on line, further experiences, and more likely than not contingencies, in the region have strengthened the requirement to substantially modernise and upgrade ADF amphibious, sealift and sustainment capacity.

As a result of DCR decisions, the Government is proposing to replace the 5700-tonne (full load) *Tobruk* (which has been in service since 1981) with a much larger, 20,000-tonne plus, amphibious vessel by 2010. Such a vessel is seen, at a minimum, as being much more capable of satisfying ADF operational requirements to lift a battalion group and be able to tactically deploy an infantry company (with some attached elements) at any one particular time, using the simultaneous operation of at least 5–6 utility helicopters of the type to be acquired under Project Air 9000.

In effect, the broad functional specification for new amphibious vessels now being expressed by the Government resembles closely the characteristics of modern landing platform dock (LPD) and Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) ship designs. It may very well be that the upper tonnage limit of these vessels may have to increase to the 25–30,000-tonne range, especially if more advanced technologies (UAV, JSF) were to be accommodated. Interestingly the Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Chris Ritchie—in response to media questions regarding the basing of VSTOL-type aircraft on such ships—said, 'no, this is an amphibious capability, and the purpose of it is to provide lift in the first case for a battalion, and to provide the transport ability ashore to a company at the time'.

The Government further proposes a second large amphibious ship to be acquired in time to replace the older of the current 8500-tonne (full load) landing platform amphibious (LPA) ships (probably *Kanimbla*, which was bought second-hand in 1993, commissioned in 1994 and then substantially modified before entering operational service in late 2000). The second LPA, *Manoora* (of similar vintage), will also be replaced around 2015, not by a large

amphibious vessel but by a new class of sea-lift ship. Senator Hill noted 'the form of that ship is not a decision that's been taken to date. There are a number of different options in that regard'.

Summing up in regard to amphibious capabilities, the Minister said that overall the DCR announcements embody 'a very significant increase in the Navy's capability to transport troops and, in conjunction with the air warfare destroyers, will significantly increase the capability of protecting those troops during the course of deployment'.

## Marking time in afloat support

To help offset the costs of the three new amphibious or sealift ships, the 40,800-tonne (full load) fleet oiler, *Westralia*, is to be replaced by a second-hand vessel that meets International Maritime Organisation maritime pollution regulations, chiefly a double-skin hull, to be introduced in 2009. This vessel will be refitted in Australia to RAN requirements. Senator Hill says the new vessel—described as a 'substitute oiler'—and expected to be in service in 2006, will be 'a less ambitious replacement than that envisaged by the White Paper, and therefore, there'll be some savings from that decision'.

This 'substitute oiler' can surely be only an interim solution to a major problem facing the Navy. There is understood to be disappointment within senior ranks that *Westralia* is being replaced with 'just another oiler', rather than a substantive underway replenishment ship capable of also resupplying bulk petrol, oils, lubricants and water (POLW), munitions, and dry and refrigerated cargo. Having to rely on only one underway replenishment ship (*Success*) continues to be a major constraint on ADF flexibility. The long-term requirement remains that when *Success*, which entered service in 1986, and the second-hand replacement oiler are retired, they will both need to be replaced by at least two (possibly three) modern underway replenishment vessels.

## Modifying the mine countermeasures force

DCR-driven savings will also lead to the mothballing of two of the six Huon-class coastal mine hunters (MHC), on the basis that should strategic requirements change, such vessels could be mobilised and brought back into service quite quickly. If savings do need to be found, this approach is a sensible compromise, and reflects the Navy's increasing embrace of mobilisation principles and practices long accepted in comparative defence forces around the world.

Given overseas experiences, it may also be possible, at some future time, to bring the mothballed MHC back into limited service as a naval reserve capability. There is no doubt that a mine warfare capability remains essential to national defence. Australia's economic reliance on bulk exports from widely dispersed mainland ports, often then passing through noted regional chokepoints such as the Lombok, Sunda and Malacca Straits, means the nation needs to retain a reasonable ability to keep sea lanes open from a threat well within both regional, and potentially even

terrorist, capabilities.

Still, the Huon-class construction program was only recently completed, with all six ships being commissioned in the May 1999 to December 2002 period. Rather than mothballing older vessels, the RAN might alternatively choose to mothball the newest two ships (*Diamantina* and *Yarra*) commissioned in 2002, thus providing an ability to substantially increase the overall life-of-type of the class. The decision to mothball two MHC does, however, slightly reduce the ADF's ability to supplement the patrol boat force, when required, or employ MHC in a general support role as with *Diamantina* in the Solomon Islands deployment.

## Hardening and modernising land forces

As recognised by substantial equipment supplementation programs since the East Timor deployment, the Government's DCR conclusions continue to support initiatives for the Army to become more sustainable, better protected and more lethal in close combat. As such, the Government continues to view the combined-arms approach favoured by Army Chief, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, whereby infantry, armour, artillery, aviation and engineer elements work together to support and protect each other, as being 'the best way of achieving rapid success while minimising friendly casualties'.

Much public attention has focused on the DCR decision to replace the Army's relatively small number of aging Leopard AS1 tanks, which are 1960s technology introduced into service in 1978, with more modern (but still perhaps second-hand) ones. The contenders are the American Abrams, the German Leopard 2 or British Challenger 2. [For further information see Ian Bostock's article p. 30.] According to Senator Hill, 'which tank, and how many, are decisions yet to be made, but we intend to move that decision-making process now really quite quickly. This decision has largely been based on experience in recent operations, and the importance that tanks have played in the protection of forces—particularly forces on the ground'.

The decision to replace the Army's tanks, however, should not be looked at in isolation from the need to 'harden' the Army across the board. As several recent deployments have shown, Australia cannot continue to rely on just maintaining an Army of predominantly light infantry forces, which, in reality, have changed little in structure and basic equipment types for over 50 years. The increased lethality of modern combat, even low-intensity conflicts, requires the Government to fund a substantial increase in the protection, mobility, firepower and communications of our land forces for joint operations.

Not all are agreed on this, however. Some subsequent press comment about the utility of tanks in South-East Asia and the South Pacific, or in campaigns against terrorism, appear to have been driven by ideological and academic fixations rather than understanding of modern warfare. They also tend to ignore the ADF's successful operational experiences when using tanks in the region since the early

1940s, in New Guinea, Bougainville and South Vietnam, during a range of high-intensity and low-intensity conflicts. Recent papers by the Land Warfare Studies Centre bring these observations out in more detail.

Senator Hill also confirmed Government support for the raising of new projects to 'rapidly acquire' combat identification (IFF) for Australian ground forces, more capable communications (including to increase interoperability with allies), and increased purchases of night-vision equipment. Such additional capabilities, says the Minister—along with the introduction of the Tiger-armed reconnaissance helicopter and additional troop-lift helicopters, to equip current (and future) amphibious transports—will result in a force 'significantly hardened and better networked'.

The Army has often been described as the 'poor relation' in ADF equipment procurement priorities over the last thirty years. The DCR announcements, encompassing lessons learnt from East Timor onwards, along with other recent initiatives, are a long overdue recognition of this state of affairs.

## Focus on the JSF and new generation airborne reconnaissance-surveillance capabilities

Ongoing decisions on restructuring the air force appear to be based, in particular, on firming confidence in the assumption that Australia faces little likelihood of a major invasion in the next 10 years. In its DCR conclusions the Government notes it remains satisfied with advice from the Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Angus Houston, for continued investment emphasis on 'a balanced and flexible Air Force comprising intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air combat, strike aircraft and combat support elements'.

Consistent with May 2003 announcements regarding the need for all future ADF investment programs to be governed by a Network Centric Warfare (NCW) 'Road Map', Senator Hill noted the Air Force 'must be networked, flexible and adaptable with modern versatile, multi-role capabilities that can contribute to joint and combined operations across the spectrum of conflicts. The Government is of the view that a sound pathway to the future has been laid'.

The ADF currently has in train plans to acquire up to 100 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) aircraft with the key decision date being 2006. New Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft are also in production, and a tender has been released for new air-to-air refuelling aircraft. According to Senator Hill, the ADF, 'also has plans for the acquisition of Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles, and a replacement for the AP-3C [Orion] under the further maritime patrol and response capability' (Project Air 7000).

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Air Marshal Houston noted at the DCR press conference, 'I think into the future unmanned vehicles will proliferate—they really will. As to whether that's the end of manned

combat aircraft, I wouldn't want to make that prediction at this stage. I think it's too early to tell. In terms of a UAV that we might get for surveillance, I think we need something of the Global Hawk type—it can stay up for over 24 hours, and with two Global Hawks, or that sort of platform, you can do the work of five, six or seven P3s with much reduced manpower. So it's a very persistent way to provide a surveillance capability'.

Air Marshal Houston continued by saying, 'we are very focused on the JSF for the future of the Air Force, and indeed the future of the ADF. I think the JSF will be effectively networked with not just Air Force capabilities, but also the air warfare destroyer, and all the other capabilities we're going to get into the ADF into the future. I think it's exactly the right sort of multi-role platform that a relatively small nation like Australia needs—it will be highly flexible, very adaptable, and ideally suited to the network warfare of the future.' He added, 'obviously a lot of studies have to be conducted to determine what our (numerical) requirements are into the future'.

Air Marshal Houston also remarked, 'we spent a reasonable amount of money upgrading the P3 to AP3 standard, but the reality is that the airframe will only last until about 2015, and we will then have to have some form of replacement. Now the way of thinking at the moment is to go for a mix of unmanned and manned platforms. So what we'll be looking at is some sort of project where the mix of unmanned aircraft is probably about five, and somewhere in the order of eight (in terms of) manned platforms. The manned platform would be capable of doing all the operational tasks the AP3 currently do—underwater warfare and also anti-surface warfare.'

## Earlier retirement of the F-111 fleet

Given Air Marshal Houston's summary of the RAAF's overall outlook, Senator Hill surprised many defence commentators by stating that the Government had adopted Air Force advice that, 'by 2010—with full introduction of the AEW&C aircraft, the new air-to-air refuellers, (and) completion of the F/A-18 Hornet upgrade programs—including the bomb improvement program [Project Air 5409], and successful integration of a stand-off strike weapon on the F/A-18s and AP-3C [Project Air 5418]—the F-111 could be withdrawn from service.'

Supporting Senator Hill's announcement, Air Marshal Houston added, 'what will dictate the retirement of the F-111 will be the achievement of a suitable capability to replace the F-111. Now we think that will be somewhere from 2010 onwards. We're very much focused on the capability the JSF will provide. And of course, what you've seen in recent times is the increasing fragility of our F-111 capability. By 2010 it will be almost 40 years old, and our studies suggest that, beyond 2010, it will be a very high-cost platform to maintain. And there's also a risk of losing the capability altogether through ageing aircraft factors.'

From the whole-of-defence perspective, Senator Hill added that, 'in light of the increasing strike capability that's going to be attached to principally the F/A-18s, but also the Orions, it's believed that the retirement date of the F-111 can be brought

forward a few years. That's guidance that's been given to government by the Air Force, and guidance the Government has accepted.' It is understood that elements of the RAAF's classified report to the Government on the future of the F-111s are now being reviewed for public release, and will contain full details of which planned F-111 upgrades will now be cancelled.

The Government's decision is to concentrate investment on sustainment and enhancement of the FA-18 fleet as it awaits delivery of the new JSF in the years after 2012, and not replace or upgrade current-generation weapons. Plans will instead concentrate on new-age weapons common to the JSF program such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM), Small Diameter Bomb, Joint Advanced Stand-off Strike Missile (JASSM), Storm Shadow and Joint Stand-off Weapon (JSOW). In the meantime, the RAAF will maximise savings (estimated as at least \$A500 million per year and probably much more as the aircraft ages) that otherwise would have been required to operate the F111s through to the 2015 plus life-of-type originally envisaged in the 2000 Defence White Paper.

## Overall thrust

In a subsequent media interview Senator Hill summarised the DCR by noting, 'we believe that these changes, not surprisingly, will lead to enhanced capability for the ADF, well into the future. They provide for a balanced force, which we think is necessary in these times of great uncertainty, and times when it's very difficult to predict the threat that we might face, particularly the threat into the future, to any extent.'

The overall thrust of the DCR reflects the large and coherent input of the CDF and Service Chiefs. The 'end user' language of the review also reflects more of an integrated, joint-force approach to capabilities and the strategic, operational and tactical concepts driving their employment.

The DCR appears to be a firm step forwards in acknowledging the need to match the strategic fluidity of the times by maximising balance and versatility in the force structure of the ADF, and in adopting an integrated approach to executing defence strategy. It also appears to be a long overdue rejection of the repetitive and unimaginative 'platform replacement' thinking that has for too long dominated the more hidebound parts of the Services, much of the Defence civilian bureaucracy and some elements of defence industry. ♦

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