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Attitude problems

across the ditch

Zhivan Alach

On both sides of the Tasman over the past few years much of the comparative commentary on Australian and New Zealand defence matters has reflected a belief that the two countries have continued to drift apart. This is driven by perceptions of starkly different levels of defence investment and differing strategic views, not least concerning the war in Iraq.

New Zealand defence spending has increased slightly and the NZDF has been refocused on what can be done within overall tight budgetary limitations. The force is not as broadly capable as in the past but the depth in capability of what remains is generally much better as those elements have finally been modernised. Australia on the other hand has increased its defence investment and broadened and rebalanced its overall defence capabilities significantly.

In 2000 New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark remarked that she considered the two countries as being 'separate strategic entities'. This has been seen by some as a political explanation for the divergent approaches as it is not a view widely shared across the political spectrum in Australia. Some Australian and New Zealand critics have even gone so far as to describe New Zealand defence policy as a 'flat earth' one, and others have accused New Zealand of developing a glorified police force rather than a true military.

Such assertions, sometimes politicised, sometimes arising in reaction to the degree of sudden change, have a grain of truth to them – but they do not tell the whole story. There has been Trans-Tasman drift in strategic perceptions but it is not as simple as New Zealand declining into isolationism and Australia becoming more assertive. Rather, there have been shifts in the foci of the two nations' approaches to national security and defence issues.

Policy settings

One obvious indication of divergence in strategic perceptions and practice is the differing attitudes the two countries have taken towards major defence policy statements. Australia released its last Defence White Paper in 2000, but has also produced two major defence updates in 2003 and 2005. These updates have taken into account developing trends, including the rise of terrorism post-9/11 and the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies. New Zealand, on the other hand, released its last major defence policy paper in August 2001 – before 9/11 – and also before NZDF reconstruction operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those

policy settings have not been updated since, at least not in any public or meaningfully transparent manner.

Declared Australian policy is assertive, adaptive, and analytical. It has become increasingly focused on two integrated major themes: domestic security and counter-terrorism focusing on federal police and security intelligence agency capabilities, and expeditionary operations overseas by the defence force. A general deepening of strategic engagement with the US and UK has also been evident, even allowing for the strong historical basis for such links anyway. The continual updating of national security policy also indicates a real effort to understand and analyse the rapidly evolving strategic environment in order to guide the development of the ADF in the most fitting (and financially sustainable) way.

New Zealand's declared defence policy focuses more on low-intensity conflicts, peace support, and the South Pacific. Missing almost entirely from it is any mention of counter-terrorism; after all, it dates from June 2000 and August 2001. The core of the policy is even older, being based on the *Defence Beyond 2000* parliamentary review of 1998-1999. Perhaps these policy settings are still appropriate, but it must be questioned whether any five-plus-year-old policy is still relevant to the evolving strategic environment. It is unclear why there has been no real change or reassessment in recent years, although senior ministers and officials apparently still consider the policy is relevant to the evolving environment and needs only minor shifts around the edges.

In regard to supporting military doctrine there are other signs of divergence as well. Australia has embraced new concepts of Network Centric Warfare and various other post-Revolution in Military Affairs issues, whereas New Zealand largely has not. The NZDF's latest capstone doctrinal publication appeared in 2004 and is a conservative approach that does not engage with evolving concepts in any depth. On the face of it, Australia is apparently attempting to analyse the new international strategic environment in a more robust intellectual manner than New Zealand. One reason for this is simply the respective sizes of the two defence forces, diplomatic corps and intelligence establishments. Other contributory factors are the differing political complexions of the Australian and New Zealand governments and perhaps the increasingly different styles of domestic party-political interaction.

Overall, despite enduring close relations between the two countries there have been substantial divergences in national security policy and doctrine. Australia has consistently

re-evaluated its policy settings since 9/11. New Zealand is still caught up in what is, at its heart, a mid-1990s mindset about the nature of strategic challenges. While evaluating the respective qualities of these policies is beyond the scope of this article, it may well be that much of the divergence stems from New Zealand policy being increasingly outdated.

Operational efforts

When the United States was attacked on 11 September 2001 both Australia and New Zealand actively responded by joining the international campaign against Islamist terrorism. Both countries were early and effective contributors to Special Forces operations in Afghanistan, although Australia was forced to withdraw from the theatre for a period due to the demands of its Iraq commitment. Both countries have also contributed frigates and maritime patrol aircraft to wider maritime counter-terrorism efforts in middle-eastern waters. In Australia's case this has been continuous but New Zealand now lacks sufficient ships and aircraft to sustain even one of each being deployed continuously.

But when the US sought allies for operations against Iraq in 2003, only Australia responded favourably, providing warships, Special Forces and fighter, transport and maritime patrol aircraft. Since the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime Australia has maintained forces in Iraq. New Zealand refused to participate in the invasion and provided only a short-term, non-combat token contribution to the reconstruction effort.

However, the general operational theme between Australia and New Zealand in recent years has not been disagreement but rather close co-operation. The two countries were highly integrated in the first East Timor operation, sharing resources and personnel, and generally agreeing on the political goals of the mission. They have worked together in the Solomon Islands as the backbone of RAMSI, again without any major disputes. In May 2006, the two of them again despatched forces to East Timor before any other country provided a contribution. In South Pacific operations, at least, the two countries have worked closely together without substantive disagreements and with effective functional integration.

The question then is whether Iraq was and is an anomaly or a sign of things to come? It seems that despite the preponderance of Australia-New Zealand military co-operation elsewhere Iraq is not an anomaly philosophically. It is probable that Australia and New Zealand will increasingly disagree about the provision of contributions to military operations outside the immediate region.

The nature of those operations will be the crucial issue and it is with the potential for higher intensity combat operations that more important disagreements are likely to develop. Most South Pacific operations will not be controversial as Australia and New Zealand both have a direct, and readily identifiable, security interest in such deployments. South East Asian operations, especially if they involve peace support rather than combat, are also likely to be generally agreed.

More distant peace support operations, in the Middle East or Africa for example, may cause disagreements. New Zealand might be more willing to contribute to such

operations than Australia, as occurred with the Bosnian deployment of 1994-1995, although that contribution may have been as much about New Zealand's position on the UN Security Council at the time as anything else. In any case, it is unlikely that either country would provide more than a token contribution to distant peace support operations.

Leaving aside the issue of whether New Zealand even has the capacity to contribute to higher intensity expeditionary operations it is safe to say that, unless it is a major global war threatening the stability of the international system, New Zealand will seek to avoid involvement. Australia, on the other hand, is not distancing itself from the United States, even when under the current presidential administration the US has become increasingly assertive and interventionist. In the wider Asia-Pacific region it is not hard to see potential conflicts in which Australia might be asked to contribute, especially if American forces are stretched by existing commitments elsewhere. North Korea, Taiwan and Iran are the most likely theatres of war, but other strategic surprises could arise. There is also the possibility that Australia might consider it needs to take a form of lead role itself in a higher intensity war in South-East Asia should one arise.

In such situations, it seems likely that New Zealand would not involve itself, or if it did, provide only a token contribution. Of course, much of this is dependent on the future political leadership of the two countries and other international strategic and economic developments. But even if the governments in both countries changed to the other side of the political spectrum, disagreements would probably remain as Labor in Australia is still more assertive than National in New Zealand. One underlying cultural difference for this divergent approach is that many New Zealanders see themselves as a South Pacific country while Australians largely see themselves as an Asia-Pacific one.

Force structure

It is force structure that most commentators focus on when they talk of a gulf developing between Australia and New Zealand. And, it is indeed in force structure that one can see the most specific indications of substantive divergence.

In recent years New Zealand has lost substantial amounts of its conventional combat capability. It has scrapped its air combat capability entirely and cut its frigate force in half – with two frigates being below the strategic rule-of-three widely considered necessary to mount and sustain meaningful deployments of one frigate at a time continuously. These cuts have seriously weakened the RNZAF and RNZN. With defence resourcing effectively capped overall, the money saved has been diverted to the Army's combat force and significant modernisation has resulted. The New Zealand Army, however, is still essentially a light-scales mechanised infantry force of only two battalion groups – again beneath the threshold of the rule-of-three – and a lightly equipped squadron-group of Special Forces.

In contrast the RAAF is modernising its air combat capability with the acquisition of 70-100 fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters, has bought four C-17 super-heavy airlifters and is buying six AEW&C aircraft.

The Australian Army has modernised its small tank force, is raising two more infantry battalions (one mechanised), is re-equipping its utility helicopter force and introducing armed reconnaissance helicopters. The RAN is reintroducing three large Air Warfare Destroyers into its order-of-battle and replacing its existing three amphibious ships with two much more capable medium-sized LHDs and a strategic sealift ship.

New Zealand's acquisition plans are much more modest and very narrowly targeted. The RNZN gains seven new vessels but none of them are really warships. There will be four light coastal patrol craft and two longer-range versions but all with gun armament only. The smallish but, in the regional sense, capable multi-role vessel enters service soon. The RNZAF is to get eight NH-90 utility helicopters to replace its 12 Vietnam-era Iroquois. Beyond that, no other major capital acquisitions are planned. By 2015, the combat and non-combat capabilities of the ADF will be several orders of magnitude greater than those of the NZDF, a situation that did not exist in 1999.

There has also been divergence in domestic security units and the role of reserve forces. Australia has re-rolled and restructured its regular and reserve forces, creating such units as the Incident Response Regiment in the former, and the new company-strength Ready Response Forces and High Readiness Reserve classification in the latter. These force elements are designed to deal with evolving homeland security tasks, especially counter-terrorism. New Zealand, on the other hand, has retained its old Territorial Army structure but with the reservists now almost exclusively

tasked with rounding out regular-force units deploying overseas. New Zealand's next deployment to the Solomon Islands, for example, will be made up entirely of Territorials. Neither the overall levels of readiness nor the organisation of the NZDF's reserve forces have been altered to deal with evolving strategic concerns.

At a lower level, some signs of convergence in force structure trends are apparent, particularly a growing emphasis on land forces on both sides of the Tasman. The New Zealand Army, largely as the result of the *Army 2005* proposal, has received new light vehicles, weapons and communications gear, and may well be increased in size in the near future following a current review. The Australian Army's *Hardened and Networked Army* plan, and the recent announcement that two additional infantry battalions will be established, indicate similar trends.

There is, however, a difference with the increased attention to the Army in New Zealand. This has deliberately resulted in an imbalanced defence force in historical terms as there has not been sufficient funding to maintain the other Services at equivalent levels of capability. Increased attention to the Army in Australia has instead re-balanced the defence force as a whole. This rebalancing has moved away from the previous structure now widely recognised as putting too much emphasis on the RAN and the RAAF at the expense of the Army. This particularly concentrates on renewing, reconstituting or expanding those types of land force that have been most required operationally in recent years. Also questionable is whether New Zealand's increased focus on the Army is equivalent in comparative magnitude and depth



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to that undertaken in Australia. The Australian Army has not been merely re-equipped but is also re-rolling and enlarging, and potentially revolutionising the capabilities of individual soldiers.

Another minor sign of convergence appears in the field of naval patrol craft. Australia is replacing its ageing Fremantle-class patrol boats with new Armidale-class boats no better armed than their Kiwi equivalents. As noted, New Zealand is acquiring a fleet of six new patrol vessels, four of similar qualities to the Armidales and two larger and more capable. Both countries have also moved to better integrate their naval patrol assets with other governmental organisations such as customs, fisheries and immigration agencies. Convergence here indicates that New Zealand is moving closer to Australian attitudes about the importance of naval patrol capacity, albeit at the expense of the RNZN's surface and anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

Despite some minor elements of convergence in force structure, the total picture shows increasing divergence between Australia and New Zealand. This portends difficulties for future operational and logistic co-operation. Not only may Australia and New Zealand differ on whether to fight together, but even when they do agree they may not be able to anywhere near as effectively, certainly not to the extent they have in the past.

Related issues

Interestingly, some administrative and policymaking processes concerning defence and wider government responsibilities in the two countries have become increasingly similar. Australia has embraced output-based accounting, which New Zealand introduced in 1990. Both now have a separate agency tasked with purchasing equipment for the defence force: the Ministry of Defence in New Zealand (which is entirely separate organisationally from the NZDF), and the Defence Materiel Organisation (a prescribed and quasi-statutory agency) in Australia. Both now publish their long-term acquisition plans, the Long-Term Development Plan in New Zealand, and the Defence Capability Plan in Australia. Economic efficiencies, rather than operational concerns, are behind many of these policymaking changes. There has also been some Trans-Tasman cross-fertilisation of organisational concepts.

Both countries have increased their raw defence funding in recent years, and indeed the size of New Zealand's increases, in relative terms, has not been that far behind Australia's. There is a difference in emphasis between the two, with Australian funding aimed at expanding the force and purchasing new equipment, whereas New Zealand's funding increases have been oriented more at improving personnel conditions of service and filling gaps in the existing force structure. As a share of GDP, however, New Zealand's defence funding has dropped steadily in the past seven years to about half that of Australia when measured on a per capita basis. It is likely to rise to approximately one per cent of GDP in the near future and remain there. Australian defence funding has remained steady at approximately 1.8-1.9 per cent of GDP throughout the period. As such, despite New

Zealand's recent increases, funding levels are still highly disparate. It should be noted that the funding disparity between the two countries grew most dramatically in the early 1990s, when the new National government in New Zealand instituted massive cuts in expenditure across the board.

Politically, defence has become an issue of increasing importance in Australia. The 'War on Terrorism', the invasion of Iraq, and the Bali bombings have all made defence a matter of concern for the voting public. Politicians on both sides of the spectrum have responded by supporting a strong defence force (or at least not questioning the need for one) and by making security an importance policy issue. In New Zealand, however, defence continues to be a matter of increasingly peripheral political importance. A good illustration of this comes from comparing the respective general elections of 2004 in Australia and 2005 in New Zealand. Whereas the Australian campaign involved considerable debate about Iraq, the nature of the future ADF, and defence alliances, there was barely any mention of defence matters at all during the New Zealand campaign. There was some discussion of the ANZUS alliance, but this was related more to New Zealand's 1980s-era nuclear-free stance than defence policy as such. The only clearly stated defence policy was Labour's, which was the status quo. The primary opposition party, National, bandied about vague notions of rebuilding the NZDF, but did not make it clear how this could be afforded given the tax cuts they were also promising.

Attitudes away

In national security matters, and often their view of the world generally, Kiwis and Aussies remain different beasts and so do the governments they elect. It is not, however, as simple as saying that Australia has retained and improved the combat capability of the ADF, whereas New Zealand has given up that focus and is moving towards militarised policing.

Australia is increasingly focused on homeland security and an improved capacity to assist international coalitions in expeditionary, and even higher-intensity, conventional warfare both regionally and to some extent globally. New Zealand has shifted the focus of its defence force towards dealing with maritime resource protection at home and only low-intensity, land-based conflicts in the region.

In New Zealand the expected spectrum of operations ranges from disaster relief through to limited counter-insurgency operations. The most expected operation is a South Pacific or South East Asian peace support operation as part of a regional coalition. Combat capabilities are not being abandoned in total; rather, what is occurring is a decrease of capability in some areas to finance an increase in others. The key question is whether this has been as a result of conscious or well-thought through policy decisions, or merely a series of incremental adjustments based on the limited resourcing committed to defence politically. It would no doubt help clarify this if New Zealand updated its extant defence policy.

With the exception of the frigate force those parts of the NZDF still left have generally improved since 1999 but at

nowhere near the rate or scale of the ADF. This has widened the capability gap between the two forces. A wider gap in national attitudes towards defence in general is also apparent and is likely to increase in the future. Perceptions (rightly or wrongly held) that New Zealand and Australia have different geo-strategic identities, the differing political spectrums, and their differing attitudes to an alliance with the United States all seem likely to draw the two countries further apart.

This will put pressure on the Australian and New Zealand defence establishments despite a personnel exchange program involving high levels of mutual trust and continuing co-operation in contingency planning for, and operations in, the South Pacific. The overall result of these trends is that by 2020 it is likely the ADF and the NZDF will be oriented for very different tasks.

New Zealand and Australia have, of course, never been completely in agreement in defence policies and attitudes, even during World War II and the Vietnam War. In 1990, just before the Cold War ended, Australia was ostensibly focused on defence against an invasion from or through South East Asia. New Zealand was focused on ensuring stability in South Pacific islands and did not seriously anticipate any direct attack unless Australia fell first. Perhaps there has always been some degree of fundamental difference in their perceptions of the world between the two, and it has been merely the particulars and degree of divergence that have changed over time. We appear to be in another period of growing divergence, but there are also some elements of

convergence that could narrow trans-Tasman differences in future.

Without casting judgement, it might be briefly asked whether the NZDF's increasing focus on low-intensity conflict on land is necessarily a complete bad thing. If the future looks more like Iraq and Afghanistan today than Iraq in 1991 and 2003, then such a force may be more useful than a more conventionally-focused one. Only time will tell. ♦

Zhivan Alach is a doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland. His thesis examines the development of defence policy in Australia and New Zealand in the post-Cold War period. He has also written on New Zealand's involvement in multinational peace support operations.

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