

Timeless strategic resonances

In February 1946, nearly 61 years ago and long before the era of the Defence bureaucracy's strategic basis papers, reviews of defence capabilities, white papers and strategic updates, the Chiefs of Staff were directed by Cabinet to prepare a Top Secret *Appreciation on the Strategic Position of Australia*. This was a formal strategic appreciation. Older readers of *Defender* will remember them. The concept may be a mystery to many, probably most, strategic policy staff in the contemporary Department of Defence.

Much of the *Appreciation on the Strategic Position of Australia* has stood the tests of time and change exceptionally well. This is chiefly due to it being a professionally and intellectually robust analysis of enduring geo-strategic realities. It was also based on the hard-learned lessons of World War II and a thorough understanding of what Australia could and could not do. Most importantly it was a piece of disciplined military staffwork written by experienced military professionals, not a bureaucratically-gestated policy paper wallowing in waffle, ideology or the latest academic or political fads.

It was also, therefore, only 28 pages long and expressed in crisp English. To broadly convert the terminology to modern usage, merely insert 'Western Alliance' for 'Empire'. For example, from the appreciation's executive summary:

- The concept of strategical isolation is irreconcilable with the realities of modern war.
- As long as the United Nations remains in being, the problem of local [continental] defence is virtually non-existent. Should the UN break down, the security of every nation ... will depend on the effectiveness of a plan of Empire Defence and on co-operation with the USA.
- Provided we have in peace a firm plan of Empire defence and arrangements for co-operation with the USA, the possibility of invasion in the foreseeable future can be excluded.
- The role of the armed forces in the next war should be the fulfillment of Australia's obligations in a wide strategical plan, and, consequently any organisation on the basis of home defence would necessitate reorganisation and inevitable dislocation in the face of emergency, as overseas commitments may be necessary and unavoidable in the initial stages of the war.
- If the forces are organised with a view to playing their part in the overall strategical plan contemplated, they would, if circumstances so required, be adaptable to the home needs without material reorganisation.
- The primary consideration in the organisation and training of the armed forces should be the provision of a balanced Task Force of three Services, and the avoidance of any system which will require reorganisation or the raising of a special force on the outbreak of war.

- Australia, being an isolated continent with a small population and limited resources, is unable to defend herself unaided against a major power. It follows that a policy of isolation can only lead to disaster, and that her security must be based upon co-operation with other nations. It further follows that:

- her preparations for war must be such that her forces can co-operate with those of other nations; and
- her dependence on outside assistance, compels her to accept that the strategic employment of her forces will be governed by considerations wider than those of a purely regional nature.

The National Security Committee of Cabinet should direct the current Chiefs-of-Staff-Committee to prepare a current strategic appreciation using the same robust methodology. Any subsequent, publicly-available, national security white paper derived from such an appreciation would undoubtedly benefit from the intellectual and professional integrity of the formal appreciation process. ♦

Withdrawal from Iraq

The ADA has warned for some time that unless the rationale for our military commitment to Iraq was better explained, public support for the commitment would continue to decline. Although the loaded wording of many opinion poll questions has partially distorted the results, there can be no doubt that this decline is increasing.

This is a growing problem in an election year where real and contrived controversies are more likely as all political parties move into full electioneering mode. Several important points need to be understood so our troops are not endangered by increased levels of politicking during the course of the year.

Labor has signaled an intention to withdraw some troops from Iraq, but not in the bull-at-a-gate manner proposed so disastrously by Mark Latham and which greatly helped them lose the last election. This is important because the safety of the troops on the ground must be the paramount consideration for all those engaging in debates on withdrawing troops. The people we are fighting in Iraq do not have a nuanced understanding of the Australian political process but they can easily gain a superficial one from satellite television and the Internet. We do not want them to come to believe, wrongly, that attacking Australians might make us withdraw our forces from Iraq.

In particular, no specific dates or strict deadlines should be mentioned in calls for the withdrawal of any troops overseas.

Kevin Rudd has also declared that Labor would not be withdrawing the maritime patrol and transport aircraft deployed in the Middle East, outside Iraq, supporting wider counter-terrorist operations as well as operations in that

country. Presumably the security detachment protecting the Australian embassy in Baghdad would also have to stay as it is unlikely the US would accept responsibility for this, or that we would be entirely comfortable trusting the Iraqi security forces (or a private security company) to do so. Similarly, the integrated headquarters staff and humanitarian support elements (such as the previous medical unit at Balad) could not be easily withdrawn, not least because of their value in helping minimise the dangers to those ground and air units we would not be withdrawing.

This means that the withdrawal would principally involve the Overwatch Battle Group stationed in southern Iraq as part of the British-led multinational division. A wind-down of British forces is likely in 2007 in order to boost the UK commitment to the NATO force in Afghanistan. This provides a good opportunity for Australia to piggyback on such a withdrawal. The British provide the heavy back-up for our troops. It would be difficult anyway for them to remain after the withdrawal of such tactical support unless the battle group was substantially reinforced. ♦

Vietnam–Iraq analogies

The Winter 2004 *Defender* discussed seven major differences and two similarities between the Vietnam and Iraq wars at that time. Little has changed in Iraq in the interim to indicate the need for any substantial re-examination of these comparisons, with the possible exception of the growing resemblance between Iranian and North Vietnamese covert action to support the respective insurgencies.

The Spring 2005 *Defender* noted that false analogies with the Vietnam War had again been spruiked by some critics of the war in Iraq, and that the examples being used were often markedly ahistorical. This is starting to look like a 15-month cycle as supposed Vietnam examples are again cited in public debates on Iraq.

At a time when the notorious American actress, Jane Fonda, has again mounted a podium to denounce her country's participation in war, there are indeed several further similarities between the Vietnam and Iraq wars emerging; but largely not as envisaged by the proponents of such analogies in the anti-war movement.

One similarity is that much criticism of the Iraq commitment is based on what the critic wants to remember happened in Vietnam as opposed to what really occurred. This blends neatly into another similarity with what occurred during the Vietnam War – the misinformed or overly-simplistic nature of much of the criticism. If this seems a tough assessment, just look at how post-war, forcibly-unified, Vietnam bore so little resemblance to the type of multi-party democratic state extolled by opponents of the allied commitment to South Vietnam during the war. And, indeed, by the experiences of so many non-communist members of the 'National Liberation Front', so lauded by the Vietnam Moratorium Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, who actually ended up in prison, exile or even dead in the years after 1975.

Another growing similarity between the Vietnam and Iraq wars is the propensity of each war's advocates and critics

to effectively speak a different language, and to speak at each other rather than to each other. While the irony of this Vietnam analogy is self-evident, it is also quite disturbing. The highly polarised positions adopted by both sides in Vietnam War debates seriously undermined objective discussion of Australian defence policy for decades after that war ended.

The sustained under-investment in the defence force over the 1972-2001 period was a direct result of Vietnam controversies and the simplistic views these generated and perpetuated. Even now, many Australians of a certain age have their views on Australian strategic policy (and military matters generally) overly influenced by their perceptions of the Vietnam War when they were young, rather than the strategic realities now facing Australia in 2007.

Finally, as the ADA has previously noted, all wars are ultimately contests of will and the quickest way to lose one is to give up. One emerging difference between the wars in Iraq and Vietnam is that the impatience and loss of confidence among the American public over the Vietnam War had two major effects that have not occurred over Iraq. With the Vietnam War the loss of confidence eventually became quite defeatist in many of its manifestations (even when the war was far from lost and was still quite winnable), and it eventually spread to many of the US troops in the field.

This does not appear to be happening over the Iraq War. The morale of US troops and of their families at home remains noticeably high (even after the high-level bungling in the war's early prosecution). Opinion polling of troops in Iraq shows little loss of confidence in the worth of the cause, and not much less in the confidence that the war can be won. This is attributable in part to the lower numbers involved compared to Vietnam, and also to the professional rather than conscript base of the modern US Army (the marines have always been volunteers). Similarly, it is very rare, almost unheard of, to meet members of the ADF who have served in Iraq and who doubt the validity of the cause or the need for the Australian commitment. ♦

Civil war in Iraq?

Similar confusion surrounds arguments as to whether the current level of bloodshed and mayhem in Iraq constitutes a civil war or not. To some extent this issue is irrelevant to Iraq's agony but it is not irrelevant to the search for solutions, because misunderstandings or over-simplifications only complicate and delay the search for, and the implementation of, any consequent solution.

Three points are worth noting in the debate, and amid the actual daily carnage on the ground in Iraq. First, most Iraqis are being killed by other Iraqis. Moreover, most are killed for principally Iraqi reasons in the sense that the presence of coalition forces per se does not appear to be a substantial motivator of the desire to kill other Iraqis. In the final analysis, the US-led coalition is now mainly involved in trying to stop this internecine fighting.

The underlying moral issue, of course, is whether this inter-Iraqi killing would be worse or less if the coalition forces withdrew from Iraq. The underlying strategic issue is

what such a coalition withdrawal would risk in the region, in terms of intervention by neighbouring states, and more broadly in terms of the security of Middle East oil supplies and the ongoing global threat from trans-national Islamist terrorism.

Second, there is no alternative Iraqi government, real or even purported, behind the various insurgencies so it is not a civil war in the standard context of two or more governing authorities competing for sovereign power over the whole country. Nor is it, at least yet, a civil war along secessionist lines – indeed the main motivation for the Sunni-Arab insurgents (both Islamist and secular) is the desire to stop any fragmentation of the existing Iraqi state.

Third, except for the security forces of the Iraqi government on one side, the fighting is not between formal armies. The insurgency principally involves attacks on civilians not battles between opposing forces.

Most of the fighting among Iraqis, bloody though it is, involves power struggles between sectarian and sub-sectarian or tribal factions. One issue worth contemplating is that there is a high likelihood the civil strife in Iraq would swiftly mutate into a full-scale civil war if the coalition forces were withdrawn before the Iraqi government is strong enough to restore a reasonable degree of law and order on its own.

There is no doubt that the mere presence of coalition forces is part of the problem but it is also still part of the solution. A fine line must be trodden between the two. Simplistic descriptions of the undoubted carnage in Iraq do not assist in walking this fine line, or in helping the Iraqi government and people grope towards a political and military solution to Iraq's many problems. ♦

Honouring our casualties

In the Winter 2006 *Defender* the ADA again protested the professional and moral disgrace whereby *wounded* soldiers were described as *injured* in Department of Defence Media statements and general media reporting. The practice has unfortunately continued, even to the extent where both terms have been used in separate paragraphs of the same departmental press release. This is not just a matter of sloppy proof-reading. We dishonour the personal risks and sacrifices of our wounded Service personnel by not properly distinguishing that they have been wounded in action when on active service in the defence of their country, rather than merely injured as a result of household, industrial or automobile accidents.

Some members of the veteran's community have expressed the belief that this increasingly frequent misuse of the term *injured* is deliberate and not just accidentally or ignorantly disrespectful. They have voiced the suspicion that it is all part of some economic rationalist agenda to reclassify veteran's benefits as simply another form of workers' compensation, with the onus of proof completely reversed on the veteran. The longer the sloppy and disrespectful use of *injured* rather than *wounded* continues the more wind is put into the sails of such fears. ♦

Vale ArFFA

As forewarned in the Spring 2006 *Defender*, the Armed Forces Federation of Australia (ArFFA) ceased operations on 28 December 2006 after 21 years due to falling numbers of ADF members who bothered to join. It may be some time before defence force personnel realise what the absence of a representative professional association means to them personally, but realise they will in due course. The speed of this realisation depends only on the speed that the lag between ADF salaries and conditions of service, and civilian community norms, continues to widen.

The federation could and should have been saved. It should have been given the opportunity, for example, to address courses at the Australian Command and Staff College in order to explain to the ADF's future unit commanders what it did and how it fitted in to defence force remuneration processes. This used to occur throughout the 1980s and 1990s but has not happened for some years for reasons that remain hazy. Similarly, ArFFA's request for accommodation for its national office in surplus Defence office space was refused – even when it was known that a refusal would mean the end of the federation's financial viability. Given the number of defence force-related private organisations that Defence does host in this way, this did not seem an unreasonable request.

The hierarchy of the ADF has long professed support for ArFFA and acknowledged its worth as an independent voice for defence force personnel, in a unique occupation, where the military 'system' is both the employer and the representative of the employees. The obvious conclusion is that the decision to deny ArFFA the accommodation assistance willingly provided to other organisations was therefore taken at a political level.

If true, this would in turn indicate a triumph of ideology over commonsense. ArFFA was a responsible representative professional body not a trade union of any description. Its constitution specifically forbade industrial action of any kind. Furthermore, most of the types of assistance the federation provided to ADF personnel will inevitably have to be picked up by another body because the problems ArFFA dealt with will not just go away. Indeed without the safety valve of ArFFA they may get worse. The most likely candidate for such requests for assistance is the Regular Defence Force Welfare Association (RDFWA), which already rightly benefits from Defence assistance with accommodation for its national and state offices.

This is the second example recently where important decisions appear to have been taken on ideological rather than practical grounds. The recent rejection of HECS waivers as an incentive for defence force recruitment and retention was apparently due to a refusal to accept that HECS could possibly be a disincentive generally. Given the undoubted success of the old Ready Reserve scheme, where the payment of tertiary fees was a key part of the remuneration package, the rejection of HECS waivers seems plain silly. ♦