

Capability, capacity and sustainability

The ADF has again demonstrated that it has the capacity to provide high-level skills and competencies to the battlefield. The work of naval units, SAS, commandos, fighter pilots, logistic, intelligence and command staff, and support units all demonstrated that we have personnel of the highest calibre and skill in military operations.

This high-level proficiency in the skills of arms also continues to be shown in the longer-term commitment in East Timor, however, in both cases the size, duration and sustainability of our forces in these and future operations is at critical risk.

The public has joyfully taken the ADF to heart and perhaps shown minimal resistance to the idea that more money should be spent on the ADF and national security as a whole. At no time in the last several decades has a government had such an opportunity and open support of the electorate for a substantial increase in defence funding.

The hidden side of the successful deployments in Iraq and East Timor must, however, be given critical exposure. The small numbers and short term of our contribution to

Iraq was a direct result of our lack of adequate troop numbers overall. The ADF does not have the ability to deploy or maintain more than small forces for anything but a short time. We did not have the capacity to rotate the Iraqi force and could not join the occupation with the numbers required. Our shortage of troops means that our specialist units are overworked in order to generate the essential success stories.

In defence the greatest waste of funds is found in the bloated and byzantine world of the Department of Defence. In every attempt to reform the department in recent years the result has been worse than the existing monster. Command and control in Australia continues to suffer from bureaucratic cancers not encountered in any comparable Western country. The layers on layers in the Department of Defence, and the continued delay in integrating our single-Service structures into true joint headquarters, cannot be sustained. No business can tolerate such duplication and waste of resources and survive global competition. The proposed increase in ADF numbers is essential, however, we need to heavily rationalise the huge top-heavy structure.

The endless squabbles over the division of funds between personnel, maintenance, operational and equipment costs must be ended. Increased troop numbers will increase costs and they will need increased expenditure on weapons and material. There is no possibility that this can be done without slashing the size of the departmental bureaucracy and moving the real expenditure on defence to at least 2.5 per cent of GDP.

The magic of new systems and weapons is being cited as a basis for smaller, heavier-armed, more mobile, information rich and lethal forces. Indeed, Australia must move even more quickly into the mastery and extension of the new means of warfare, however, the cost of obtaining and maintaining sufficient stocks for training and operations will demand increased outlays.

The apparent tectonic shift in the means and form of waging war is open to dangerous misconceptions. The new technologies offer and will continue to offer huge advances in the more accurate application of deadly force. There are, however, a number of obvious advantages that remain in the hands of those who do not fight by the rules of the technological leader.

The limited urban combat in Iraq showed how deadly it remains for combatants and especially civilians. In our region the geographic realities of the SW Pacific, Southeast and East Asia emphasise the benefits and the distinct disadvantage of the new technologies. In operating with two large and powerful military allies, the short run to goal in Iraq is highly misleading as a model for ADF tasks in our region.

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