

Strategy from the armchair

Professor Stewart Woodman

I sip my beer. Images of Iraq flash endlessly across the television screen. A presidential palace bursts into stark relief against the night sky as a cruise missile fired from a US cruiser hundreds of kilometres away in the Persian Gulf slams into the compound. Children holding hands wander slowly across a dirt road as a main battle tank threatens to engulf them. It is an image made all too real by the foreshortening of the telephoto lens — but is this, I wonder, the face of future war?

An ad intervenes. A young ADF engineer sits straddled across the roof beams of a school being rebuilt in an East Timorese village. Children play happily on the grass below. ‘Are you looking for a worthwhile career?’ the commentator challenges. I pause. The contrasting images of devastation and reconstruction, of high technology and very simple lifestyles, are almost too much to comprehend.

As I lean on the kitchen benchtop, my mind wanders to those other images that have been so rudely pushed aside by the second CNN war. What happened to the premonitions of Indonesia’s disintegration following the Asian financial crisis and the ousting of President Suharto? Has China suddenly been accepted as a responsible international citizen not likely to threaten Taiwan — at least until the next Olympics? Does anyone even remember the ‘children overboard’ affair and, tell me again, when did that happen? Even North Korea’s intimidatory missile firings struggle for airtime. Fortunately, on the bedside table lies a copy of Australia’s National Security, the 2003 Defence Update. At least there I might find some insights into this strategic cauldron into which we have been swept. I flip the pages. The global agendas of terrorism and the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction stare starkly back.

Terrorism has a new face. The symbolic attacks and hostage taking of the past are no longer. Al Qaeda’s aims are far more ambitious. It seeks, the Update asserts, to build international terrorist networks to roll back Western values, engagement and influence and to supplant moderate Islamic governments. Chillingly, inflicting mass civilian casualties is seen as a deliberate objective. The imprints of September 11 and the Bali bombing are unmistakable.

And make no mistake — this is not simply a Middle-Eastern affair. Bali has destroyed any last shred of Australian complacency. The tentacles of Al Qaeda stretch deep into South East Asia. A network of extremist cells threatens to create a radical Islamic state encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the southern Philippines. ‘Australia’s security is affected if there are any regions in the world from which terrorists with Al Qaeda’s ambitions

and capacity can operate internationally with impunity’.

‘But ...’, the words come out involuntarily. ‘But ... but ... how can little Australia play in such a global game?’ How do you tackle such a shadowy enemy? No territory, not even paramilitary forces, no warning — exploiting the very symbols of development to wreak destruction. My thoughts race. And who is to respond? In democracies we have always kept the military apart from the civil population. No state control welcome here ... not across our freedoms.

Then comes the double whammy. What if these terrorists, or a rogue state like Iraq or North Korea, could vent their fanaticism with weapons of mass destruction? The collapse of the Soviet Union, dual use technologies, ballistic missile proliferation ... a chemical or biological attack to dwarf the World Trade Centre. Everything inside me screams ‘No!’

But September 11 seemed unthinkable ... and Sarin gas in the Tokyo subway? I don’t want to believe it but I am no longer sure it is unthinkable. And why should Australia be immune? Forget the missiles. Civil airliners and cargo containers mock our much-vaunted strategic isolation almost every hour of every day. And the island hopping of asylum seeker boats and pleasure craft from the north east and north west ... is it only drugs and illegal immigrants we have to worry about?

The words on our immediate neighbours hardly register. Weak leadership, declining standards of governance, law and order in tatters, economies on the verge of bankruptcy. From Jakarta to Port Vila, the degree may differ but the challenges to state survival are real and immediate. Bougainville has taken years. Solomon Islands hasn’t even got to first base. And what are the prospects for PNG and perhaps even Indonesia?

We can’t be expected to solve all their problems for them — no argument there. But to expect the islands to do it for themselves! Talk about a half-truth. Dispersed geography, little infrastructure, few resources, rapid population growth and tensions between traditional chiefly authority and national governance. Who can make any headway against that tide without substantial support? No, the arc of instability is here to stay. Don’t tell me we can ignore it.

The frown on my brow deepens. The kettle promising that much-needed injection of caffeine whistles unheard in the background. How can a country of Australia’s size and modest defence capability manage such a diverse security agenda? Tropical Honiara one day, downtown Baghdad the next. The engineer rebuilding the school, the sniffer dog at the airport. They are light years away from stealth bombers and laser-guided munitions, stretching the potential contingency spectrum to breaking point.

I dive back into the Defence Update, desperately seeking answers. I shake my head. Only three pages ... that can't be right? The tone is reassuring. Australia does have 'a Defence posture for the times'. Important niche capabilities will be needed to support the global war against terror but otherwise the changes are not large. Some rebalancing of capabilities and priorities, that is all. There will be no fundamental change to the size, structure and role of the ADF established in the Defence 2000 White Paper.

I berate myself. Of course, the big decisions are only made in Defence White Papers. They come out about every seven years. And we all know defence capabilities cannot be changed over night. But wait, wasn't the last White Paper all about the defence of Australia and operations in the more immediate Asia-Pacific? Sure, East Timor was there and some of the new transnational challenges, but the bottom line was to maintain 'an integrated and balanced joint force'.

But what does a 'capability edge' mean in the face of a terrorist threat. Asymmetry means just that, people don't fight on your terms. And if we really think rogue states are going to get ballistic missiles (it is certainly cheaper than an invasion force!) what's the point of a maritime strategy to defend the sea-air-land gap to the north?

So what are we trying to do? Stop the new challenges before they grow? That crusade is already dragging us in coalition to the far reaches of the globe. But if those movements are fundamentalist, can you really bomb them out of existence? Might not significant pre-emptive action turn moderates into radicals and radicals into martyrs?

The terrorist training camps in Afghanistan were one thing — real and immediate. How much further can the action go without fermenting the very forces we are trying to eliminate? And what risks are there for the nation's regional stature and influence if perceived as riding too closely on the coat tails of America? For Australia, one

thing is certain. It's about specialist capabilities, not integrated forces.

But if those global tasks are only an add-on, are we getting the security of our immediate neighbourhood right? Yep, we did manage East Timor and the ADF did a pretty professional job — but there was very little left in the cupboard at the end. The potential demands on personnel numbers and logistics are mind-boggling. High technology seldom rates. And rebuilding nations isn't a short-term task. When you're the biggest fish in the local strategic pond, you can't really walk away.

Hey, and let's not forget the average digger in all this. Soldier one minute, social worker the next, increasingly caught amid unfamiliar communities — sometimes friendly, often indifferent, occasionally hostile. Even at patrol level, the decisions can be very weighty. The cameraman on that nearby fencepost threatening to beam any false move to the world within moments.

Whatever happened to the comfortable divisions between strategic, operational and tactical decision making? 'We care for our people', the motto proclaims. Let's pray we're preparing them properly for this.

I slump back into my chair. Some adjustments at the margin. I don't think so, Minister. The Update calls it as it is: the world is different. The battlefield is different. The ADF is being stretched to the far boundaries of the conflict spectrum. There are no longer geographic pegs to shape our capability ambitions. Terrorism, missiles and the new interventionist agenda are all compressing strategic time. The dollars to do everything simply aren't there.

I stare unseeing at the flickering images. Choices must be made for the future, and soon. 2007 ... the next White Paper? ... that's a bridge too far. I shake my head. My beer lies flat, half finished on the table.

The strategic value of Taiwan

Hisahiko Okazaki

What is strategy?

To discuss the strategic importance of Taiwan is a delicate task. It is in itself delicate to discuss any strategy openly. Strategy is based on the calculation of naked national interests. It is irrelevant to current norms or ethics of international conduct. Even if not unethical, it could be discourteous. 'He is neither rich nor promising. Therefore, I wouldn't think of marrying

him'. Any lady has the right to think so. But it is definitely impolite to explicitly say so.

When one refrains from discussing strategy, however, quite often, one forgets the importance of strategic thinking. After the Russo-Japanese War, strategy was neither taught nor discussed in Japanese military education because it was considered to be top secret. The Japanese military taught only battlefield