

Archipelagic manoeuvre warfare for the ADF

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At a glance ...

- Archipelagic warfare is likely to feature strongly in the ADF's future.
- The complex geography and terrain of our region favours the kind of grinding, attritional warfare Australia cannot afford to fight.
- True amphibiousness and 'jointery' are cornerstones of an archipelagic manoeuvre warfare approach.
- We need to establish a full-time authority for our joint amphibious capabilities.

Using White Paper 2000 terms, arguments over the priority of the Defence of Australia (DOA) and the Defence of our wider Regional (and global) Interests (DRI) has ebbed and flowed with successive governments. Military writers periodically highlight the adverse effects that shifting strategic guidance has had on our military capability over many years. They invariably overlook, however, how contemporary military leaderships have opportunistically exploited each new expression of strategic guidance in order to suit single-Service prejudices and agendas—at the expense of net strategic effect.

The fundamental differences between the force requirements of DOA and DRI are actually few. The strategic approach route to Australia is the 'region', therefore exactly the same geographical factors apply to both DOA and DRI.

Our northern and north-eastern approaches comprise the most archipelagic regions in the world. Archipelagos present different tactical and operational-level problems to those encountered in either continental or maritime geography. Less obviously, archipelagos present different problems to the interface between an ocean and a continent. Archipelagic warfare is a creature of its own with an interdependence of maritime, land, air and littoral warfare of an order of magnitude more intimate than in any other type of theatre. Consequently, existing doctrines cannot be simply run in parallel and expected to work.

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circumspection in Canberra until they have had the stamp of approval from US or British military thinkers. Proposing that archipelagic warfare deserves its own categorisation might, therefore, be somewhat of an unrewarding task. Nonetheless, archipelagic warfare is ideally suited as a framework for the development of the three most topical operational philosophies in the ADF: network centric warfare (NCW), effects-based operations (EBO) and manoeuvre warfare.

In broad terms EBO is the overarching philosophy, archipelagic manoeuvre is the mechanism and NCW is the enabler. The limitations of each of these three concepts, when applied in a non-archipelagic scenario, have been brought into stark relief by recent events in Iraq.

The political and military undesirability of messy commitments is self-evident but difficult to avoid in what the Army describes, accurately, as complex environments. Densely populated urban areas, ethnic, tribal and religious tensions, and resource shortages, characterise the most violent areas of Iraq. Add jungle and mountains, limited infrastructure, poor education standards, widespread illiteracy and a culture of 'wontok' favouritism and you have the type of environment Australian troops would

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generally face ashore when operating in the region. The longer the duration of a land operation, the more

likely the social and physical complexities of the operating environment will come to dominate military factors. In other words, the longer it lasts the greater the potential for a deployment to evolve into a quagmire.

This works against Australia from the strategic to the tactical level. Due to our numerically small forces, we have to employ manoeuvre in order to apply strength against enemy vulnerabilities—while avoiding the reverse. Until the warfighting is well and truly concluded we cannot afford to have our limited forces bogged down and unavailable for offensive manoeuvre.

Traditional manoeuvre theories at the operational (and tactical) level were largely conceived for the land environments of a bygone era. They produced some spectacular successes but frequently failed. Most of the failures were due to unsuitable terrain and/or insufficient forces. Blitzkrieg has a habit of coming unstuck in dense,

complex terrain such as cities and jungles unless very large forces are available. Complex terrain also favours numbers and determination more than technology. It encourages exactly the sort of attritional warfare that Australia cannot afford to fight.

From a land-centric view our region is a mixture of jungle, mountains, grasslands, lightly timbered plains and urban sprawl. It looks ill-suited to high-tempo manoeuvre operations but step back far enough to see the blue bits on the map and it is perfect. The objectives may usually be on land but the manoeuvre medium is the sea. Given Australia's limited resources it is necessary to be able to move freely between objectives, poise as required and engage and disengage at will. This is archipelagic manoeuvre warfare. If the Australian Government is looking for a niche capability that is of real value to its allies, while still central to our own security, this is it.

Throughout our region nearly all the key strategic infrastructure is within 25 kilometres of the sea. If we can control the sea we can wage as much or as little of the war on the land as we choose. By adopting archipelagic manoeuvre warfare we get far greater military value from our scarce infantry battalions and their even scarcer supporting elements. Once ashore, a combined-arms battlegroup is a minor tactical grouping but while it is manoeuvring at sea it represents more of an operational-level force. It can strike targets over such a wide radius of action that predicting its targets becomes very difficult. Such a mobile force can, therefore, tie down opposing forces many times its own combat power. It can pin forces simply by its presence yet can avoid or negate enemy strengths by going elsewhere. It follows, therefore, that the ability to re-embark and reconstitute such a manoeuvre force is one of its defining characteristics.

The joint-force package necessary to achieve such manoeuvre and combat power has some very specific requirements. The force demands a special type of agility, to exploit the natural isolation of archipelagic land masses, in order to bypass strong enemy forces, and to reach out and hit wherever necessary to achieve the required effect. In practical terms this requires the ability to achieve surprise and then maintain sufficient operational tempo to stay inside the enemy's observation, orientation, decision action-loop. Achieving this depends on designing the force for exceptional cross-environment agility otherwise the landing sites become too predictable and the tempo stalls at the sea-shore interface. This agility is as important for re-embarkation as for getting ashore in the first place.

The price of such a high degree of agility is a limit on the physical weight and operational mass of the landing force. There is no reason it should not have armour, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and serious combat engineer and aviation support. What it cannot bring, however, is the logistic tail to enable long-term operations independently

of its ships. By keeping the bulk of its command, administrative and logistic functions at sea the force not only saves weight but facilitates rapid re-embarkation. This is quite different from the 'break in then pour it all ashore' approach that characterised many historical amphibious operations and is still an underlying theme in the Army's concept for Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment (MOLE).

In some circumstances, peace enforcement for example, a large footprint ashore is unavoidable but this is not a job for an archipelagic manoeuvre force anyway. Sea-lift assets would suffice for such tasks and it is important to make a clear distinction between an amphibious force and a sea-transportable force. The former emphasises force multiplication through manoeuvre while the latter provides weight but no force multiplication effect. Neither is a substitute for the other.

So how is Australia positioned to develop an archipelagic manoeuvre warfare capability? Most of the necessary equipment either already exists on inventory or is to be procured as per the DCP so the materiel transition should not be difficult. Unfortunately, the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO) is neither culturally nor organisationally well equipped to handle development of something as essentially and intimately joint as an archipelagic manoeuvre warfare capability.

The fragmented way in which the ADO manages its current 'amphibious' (really more of an amphibious-lift) capability illustrates this perfectly. It would be easy to recount how non-management of the capability has historically resulted in a force that is less than the sum of its parts. There is no joint concept for amphibious operations, no joint amphibious tactical guidance, no joint amphibious command structure and no joint amphibious staff.

Chief of Navy (CN) is 'the lead authority' for amphibious matters in the ADF but he does not have a Joint Amphibious Staff to support and advise him. Furthermore, CN's effective authority to direct the other Services to develop in any way other than that which they have decided for themselves is questionable.

In tacit recognition of the lack of a point of focus the one-star level Joint Amphibious Steering Group (JASG) was created. It is a step in the right direction but does not go nearly far enough, primarily because it has no real authority. It can only recommend and the Services are free to disagree with, reject or ignore its recommendations. Furthermore, it relies, by necessity, on single-Service advice only, which inevitably comes with inherent single-Service baggage.

Each of the Services understands its conventional business very well but has only a superficial understanding of how it must adapt to become part of a cross-environment, joint manoeuvre force. It is highly improbable, for example,

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the sharp end

that the Navy would entertain shifting a cent of Air Warfare Destroyer funds to buy better amphibious ships or that the Army would put a rapid blade-folding capability above C-130 transportability for its new helicopters. Objective analysis suggests, however, that both should do exactly that.

Even if the JASG had the requisite executive authority it would still not be a suitable mechanism for managing a true amphibious capability. A committee comprising busy one-star officers and meeting only quarterly is not suited to dealing with a capability that revolves around low-level detail.

Below the JASG the amphibious capability is stove-piped between and within the Services. Who, for example, is the Army point of focus for amphibious capability? The answer: no one. Who manages amphibious capability in the RAN, is it the Commander Amphibious Task Group (COMAUSATG)? No. COMAUSATG is an operational commander with a busy program and a skeleton staff, not a capability manager. The Amphibious and Afloat Support Group (AASG)? Good try, but again no. The AASG manages a disparate collection of ships, not a capability. It can't manage the capability because the capability is joint and the AASG, as part of Maritime Headquarters, has no joint authority or expertise.

The JASG lacks the authority, the time and the staff to resolve these deeply entrenched problems. A properly constituted, full-time joint amphibious authority would be better placed to do this. There is a precedent in the type of authority required in the form of Special Operations Command. Surely joint amphibious manoeuvre is as important as special operations to an archipelagic maritime nation? Amphibious manoeuvre operations do not stand alone but then neither do special operations. The same management and command logic applies to both. No nation with any serious commitment to amphibious capability tries to get by without a full-time 'owner'.

Despite making all the right noises the underlying single-Service cultures are still exactly that, single-Service. They see archipelagic manoeuvre operations, and amphibious operations in particular, as secondary to their traditional roles. Until the ADO recognises the significance of regional geography and creates an owner for our amphibious capability these core elements of ADF manoeuvre warfare capability will not realise their potential. Without this DRI and DOA will be more likely to be attempted (and perhaps resolved) by attrition rather than blitzkrieg. ♦

How the Brits do it

Perhaps elements of the UK model are transferable to the Australian situation. COMUKMARFOR and COMUKAMPHIBFOR are CINCFLEET's deployable (two-star ranked) joint task force commanders. The former commands blue-water operations while the latter commands littoral operations. COMUKAMPHIBFOR has a joint staff split fairly evenly between green and blue uniforms. He has two subordinate one-star commanders, Commander Amphibious Task Group (COMATG) and Commander 3 Commando Brigade. These one-star commanders are the CATF and CLF as described in amphibious command and control doctrine. COMUKAMPHIBFOR is recognised throughout the British defence structure as the authority, 'owner' and advocate of amphibious capability. There is no ambiguity.

Given that Australian resources only run to a battalion group-based landing force, rather than the UK's brigade, the Australian equivalent structure would be set one rank lower. COMAUSAMPHIBFOR would be a one-star officer and, in the absence of a Marine Corps, would probably have to be a rotational post between Navy and Army. His subordinates, CATF and CLF would therefore be a naval captain and a colonel. This corresponds with doctrine and matches the existing COMAUSATG structure. The CLF and his small staff, however, would have to be created from scratch.

The COMAUSAMPHIBFOR model is by no means the only option and may not even be the best. The point is that the capability needs an owner who is not subordinated to single-Service agendas. The capability also needs staff who understand, in minute detail, the interrelationship between the maritime and land aspects of archipelagic manoeuvre operations.

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