

How to avoid backing into the future

Peter Cosgrove

Musing on grand strategy

Nearing retirement after 40 odd years of eventful service in the Army and the defence force I wish to record my enormous pride in the men and women of the Australian Defence Force. They are a credit to the nation and have burnished the reputation of the Australian Defence Force by meeting, in their inimitable manner, every one of the diverse challenges that have been thrown at them. I leave the ADF next month full of optimism about our national character, based on what I have seen of our young folk on operations all over the globe.

And I use the term ‘all over the globe’ advisedly. The deployment to the Middle East in April of an Australian task group based on the Second Cavalry Regiment affirms one of the timeless verities of Australian history; namely that Australia’s national interests are not exclusively bound by its territory or local geography.

Our national Grand Strategy needs to continue recognising this fact not hide from or it or attempt to disguise it. When I speak of Grand Strategy I mean that suite of national characteristics and assets— cultural, physical and intellectual—which both inform and shape a nation’s engagement with the world and dictate the whole-of-nation strategies it implements to secure its survival, and advance its interests.

Crucially, effective Grand Strategy is always directed at securing freedom of action at the national level, promoting an environment through which a nation has the choices and options to pursue its legitimate sovereign interests and the prosperity of its people in the international system.

The defence force is but one component of that entire suite of national capabilities. The ADF contributes to national freedom of action through maintaining a complementary level of defence and security freedom of action. First and foremost within our immediate region, but when the national interest demands, further afield. We achieve this preferably by engagement, posture and deterrence but if necessary, as a last resort, by force. Preferably in a collective response, but if necessary, unilaterally.

Thinking globally not reacting locally

In a recent very significant address to the Lowy Institute, the Prime Minister highlighted the unfortunate simplification of our security debate, noting the polarisation in our public commentary into mutually exclusive ‘globalists’ or ‘regionalists’. Such arbitrary definitions, and the mental constraints they encourage, ultimately work to reduce rather than enhance our freedom of action. I am sure that many of the so-called globalists and regionalists are uncomfortable at being thus pigeon-holed.

Identifying this faux polarisation, the Prime Minister said “History’s legacy is a global outlook. We are, overwhelmingly, a country of migrants and their descendants. We are an open economy, dependent on global markets. And we are a Western liberal democracy with a profound interest in the structures and ideas that govern the international system. It is true that Australia’s most immediate interests and responsibilities will always lie in our region. But we have global interests that require strong relationships with all centres of power.... In a world more interconnected than ever before, the balanced alignment of Australia’s global and regional engagement is a measure of our strategic maturity.”

Maritime power to protect maritime dependency

We are an advanced maritime power. Australia’s bedrock way of life and indeed our national survival has always depended on our ability to reach our overseas markets. This fact alone renders it imperative that Australia possesses the integrated capability to both defend our homeland and to project military force and associated influence beyond our territorial waters. That is, we need a depth of action and a depth of choice.

Indeed, without an appropriately scaled capacity to reach out well beyond our shores, our nation’s dependency on the world market could be exploited to produce a form of Grand Strategic blackmail, whereby an adversary might seek to curtail our freedom of action through credible threats to our maritime lifelines.

The relatively modest capability needed to pursue such a course of action by an adversary is well within the grasp of most modern states and even some non-state actors. It could be directed at us to restrain a humanitarian intervention or conventional military deployment in support of an ally or friend. Such a scenario is at least as credible as any involving an attempted lodgement of forces in our North.

The evolution of Australian strategic policy since the watershed Dibb Review of 1986 is essentially the story of our responses to a move from a world more defined by the geography of bipolar great power rivalry to the complexity of our modern, globalised community, in which geography is less dominant. The 9/11 attacks did not change the world so much as they opened our eyes to the fact that it had already changed.

The overwhelming importance of strategic geography has declined in the era of globalisation. In military and strategic terms this epochal trend has led to the proliferation of WMD, high levels of trans-national terrorism, expanded black markets in weapons, money and labour, as well as extraordinary advances in the lethality of the individual combatant and the ubiquitous availability of small arms. These elements are either independent of geography, or are at best weakly dependent on geography.

Global, modern and adaptive approach

The Al Qa'eda attacks on New York and Washington were planned in Internet chat-rooms. The terrorists used e-mail and mobile phones to exchange tactical information. They booked their seats online.

The benign view is that globalisation, especially the IT revolution, has flattened hierarchies and exercised a democratising effect. That is true to a point. But it has also brought a range of strategic effects within the grasp of individuals and small groups. These latter are agile and can mount lethal operations over strategic distances with relative ease and impunity. They may arrive in a business class seat.

The era of globalisation has transformed every aspect of society and culture. While the extraordinary improvements in health care, communications and science are unequivocally good, they have not been distributed evenly. There have always been Haves and Have-Nots in the global community but the old inequities, real and perceived, between say the Peasant and the Prince, are now magnified, globalised and open to manipulation by those savvy in the use of culture and communications.

Warfare, which is of course another, albeit extreme, form of political discourse cannot and has not stood aloof from the influences of globalisation, the most pronounced strategic effect of which has been the collapse of time and space as planning factors. Geo-strategic space is no longer a reliable buffer and warning time often a luxurious irrelevance. The most physically proximate threats are not by definition the most dangerous. For example, which might hold more catastrophic consequences for our economy—the closure

of the Straits of Hormuz or the closure of the Straits of Malacca? I'm not an economist, and I know both would be disastrous, but my money is on, and our oil is in, the Straits of Hormuz.

At any given moment, more than one million of our citizens are either living or working overseas. Three quarters of a million Australians reside permanently overseas and three million of us travel overseas annually. In the age of highly mobile capital, our corporations also have global reach, with billions of dollars in financial instruments and physical assets offshore.

How do we protect them? Clearly, for a middle-ranking power there are real constraints on our ability to provide external security for our citizens and businesses. The most effective way for us to achieve this security is by contributing to a stable regional and global system through collaboration with like-minded nations and organisations, generally focusing on our region where our influence is arguably greatest.

In my view this is how Australia has functioned as a state since Federation. We have recognised that our interests are not served by major disequilibrium in the global politico-economic system and we collaborate with Allies and friends to prevent or manage such possibilities.

I cannot think of an overseas deployment by the Australian Defence Force that has not been undertaken in conformity with this Grand Strategy. Controversies over particular deployments have always been dealt with within our political system but they cannot be avoided by artificially posing an ill-suited strategic doctrine or force structure – the real world gets in the way.

I do not intend to labour the obvious point that the ability to project military force is concomitant of being a mature, engaged maritime power with diverse material and intangible interests around the world. It has always been thus and we have always been willing and able to deploy military forces overseas from the birth of the nation. In the light of our history I have always found it puzzling that there can be a debate, when it has occasionally arisen, over whether the ADF should be capable of operating beyond Australia's continental shelf.

Executing grand strategy

The current expression of our Grand Strategic reality can be found in every authoritative statement of Government policy, from the Defence White Paper to the Defence Update and the Foreign Policy White Papers. In particular, the 2000 Defence White Paper committed the ADF to a joint maritime strategy—an important but incremental development of the good work of previous White Papers.

Significantly, *Defence 2000* recognised that the strategic tasks of defending Australia and contributing to the security of the immediate neighbourhood were connected limbs of the same strategic problem. For this reason the Government directed the ADF to maintain the capability for the sustained deployment of an Army Brigade in the immediate neighbourhood, along with the ability to simultaneously

deploy a battalion group to a lesser contingency of more limited duration.

This represented a clear acknowledgment that even the “Defence of Australia” doctrine was not synonymous with defence of the sea-air gap. The White Paper was informed by our experience of East Timor in 1999 and, in my view, it rightly returned ‘land’ to the ‘sea-air-land’ gap that more accurately describes the operational geography of our maritime approaches.

In my time as CDF, we—all of the Chiefs—working as a team, have sought to implement this strategic guidance with fidelity. We have also sought to do so in terms of an operationally joint and integrated defence force structure rather than separate single-Service perspectives. Accordingly, I have been bemused by occasional newspaper articles alleging to the effect that rogue Service Chiefs have torn up the White Paper and the associated Defence Capability Plan (DCP). Be assured that just as there is a substantial debate on these sorts of issues in Defence, so there is a very high degree of consensus.

I will attempt to dispel some myths about particular platforms and systems in addressing how we are seeking to realise our grand strategy. Every major acquisition supports an overall ADF endstate that conforms faithfully to Government guidance.

Our capabilities are geared to defending Australia through, amongst other things, being capable of muscular reach—the projection of joint power within our region. That is squarely within the requirements laid down by the extant White Paper.

In developing the capacity to operate within the region, we may by default acquire capabilities that are also able of reaching, say, Lapland. But I hasten to add that that would only occur in the event the Lapps desperately needed and asked for our assistance and the Government judged that providing such assistance was in our national interest.

Possession of a capability per se should not presume its use in any or all contingencies for which it is theoretically capable. After all, most ships can sail around the world but not all ships do. When evaluating potential adversaries we have adopted this perspective in the well-known formula whereby capability plus intent equals threat. Of these variables, intent has always been considered the most changeable and the hardest to discern or measure. Yet our strategic debate has sometimes been distorted by applying a strange twist to this formula for our own force development.

Capability is deemed to equal intent or at least drive it, not for others but only for us, as if we cannot trust ourselves. This is akin to suggesting that the German mobilisation timetable in July and August 1914 somehow dragged all the statesmen of Europe in its wake. In our strategic debate we must be wary of the thinking that says that ships *will* sail around the world just because they *can* sail around the world.

Such commentaries often reflect an obsession with individual items of kit and an insufficiently joint-Service approach and understanding rather than with the contours of Grand Strategy and integrated capability systems. Tape measures are produced to assess whether particular platforms

may be able to operate beyond an expertly proclaimed ‘acceptable’ distance from our shores.

Amphibiousness – A real joint effects-based capability

Essentially this strange theory, whereby strategy is derived from the force structure, rather than the force structure from strategy, has recently been most vociferously applied to the introduction of new amphibious ships into the Navy — very much a joint-focused and inherently joint capability.

The syllogistic argument seems to be as follows. ‘These ships are big and have flat decks. So do aircraft carriers. Ergo, these ships are aircraft carriers. Instead, let’s have more, smaller ships because this will proof any future government against ambitious temptations.’

This argument runs counter to the specific guidance contained in the 2000 White Paper namely “...the deployment of land forces needs to reflect a new balance between the demands of operations on Australian territory and the demands of deployments offshore, especially in our immediate neighbourhood.” And, from the *2003 Defence Update*: “The changed global strategic environment, and the likelihood that Australian national interests could be affected by events outside of Australia’s immediate neighbourhood, mean that ADF involvement in coalition operations further afield is somewhat more likely than in the recent past.”

The planned enhancement of Australia’s amphibious capability is derived from that strategic guidance. The decision to introduce two medium-sized amphibious ships was based on rigorous analysis of the entire suite of influences which in total lead to a recommended capability. It is easy to propose one option or another but we have to consider every aspect of their operation and sustainment over the next three decades. The most intractable of these issues is manning.

I intend to examine this issue in some detail in order to rebut some of the bromides being peddled about these ships.

First, the key to the success of an amphibious operation is the speed at which the force to be landed can be deployed from ship to objective. The speed of the build-up reduces the risk to the force elements that are first deployed by rapidly increasing their combat power. Within the combined-arms battlegroup, the building block of land power, the smallest force element that can manoeuvre and protect itself is a company group—a force ranging from 150 to 200 plus personnel depending on its task.

Ideally the first element deployed from an amphibious ship, will move by helicopter, preferably from over the horizon at night. The simultaneous insertion of a company group requires around a 12-helicopter lift providing sizeable helicopters are employed. This requirement drives the number of helicopter spots required within an amphibious flotilla.

The combination of the requirement to deliver a battalion group force, in waves, and to have 12 helicopter spots per wave available, indicates that the viable options are either

two six-spot LHDs or combinations of these ships and/or smaller ships. In its preference for two six-spot LHDs we have been swayed by other very important influences.

As I indicated at the outset, manning is the major constraint. Regardless of size there are certain inescapable manning requirements for a naval vessel. Some vital skill sets must be accommodated whether we are talking about a crew of 20 or 200. Cooks and medical personnel are obvious examples, but only two of many.

Opting for four platforms rather than two, all other things being equal, imposes enormous manning pressures on the ADF over the life of such ships. Such real world compromises are very much the stock in trade for force planners, whether uniformed or civilian.

Finally, is there any compelling operational argument against the larger platform? The answer quite definitely is no. The survivability of a larger ship is in most circumstances greater than that of a smaller ship. Force protection of a surface vessel essentially involves defending a point on the ocean: the fewer and more robust the better, from a force protection perspective. And the larger the platform the more likely that it will be able to sustain damage but continue with its task.

Hardening the land force

Similarly flawed commentary, in some quarters, has also prevailed about hardening the land force especially the decision to purchase the M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tank to replace the Leopard currently in service with the Army. Again, the overarching authority for this decision is the 2000 White Paper, which required that Australian forces be provided with sufficient combat weight to carry out their missions with the minimum possible risk. And the government has reaffirmed its requirement that the Army be capable of generating Land Power through the combined-arms team as its contribution to ADF war fighting capability.

Viewed in that light, upgrading the tank fleet, to reduce the risk to the land force as a whole from a significant increase in the lethality of hand-held anti-armour systems, was hardly a radical departure from extant guidance. This is especially so when the overall numerical strength of the tank fleet is actually being halved during the long overdue modernisation of the capability.

Again, the supposed strategic commentators who lampooned this decision will never be asked to deploy to a hostile urban or jungle environment in the region or elsewhere against the modern and future panoply of threats. Accordingly, their speculations about what level of protection our soldiers need to succeed in their operational mission and come home safely is pretty self-indulgent.

The claim that Abrams tanks cannot operate in this country or that is manifest nonsense. By definition, tanks need not be reliant on civil infrastructure. On occasions in South Vietnam as a young infantry platoon commander in combat, I was very relieved to have venerable old Centurion tanks alongside me leading us into bunker systems.

I have even read that Abrams tanks are somehow inappropriate because bridges in our near region are too small.

I was taught at Duntroon that to avoid being channelled into ground of an enemy's choosing all but our trailing logistics units should avoid bridges—things have not changed! And our assessments suggest regional bridging is not as feeble as the critic's surmise. It is of course a reality that every modern Main Battle Tank is larger than our old Leopard tank. While our supposedly 'huge' tank weighs less than the latest Leopard model and only slightly more than a Challenger, a mere three tonnes spans the weights of all three modern tanks considered.

One of the darker, second-order effects of the rapid transit of goods and people which has characterised the phenomenon we refer to as globalisation, has been the emergence of sophisticated markets in illegal weapons. Porous borders and electronic funds transfers have conspired to create a world in which the individual is exponentially empowered.

Even some criminal gangs in failed or failing states operate tanks and other armoured vehicles and heavy weapons. In a wider range of operating environments terrorist and criminal organisations can readily gain access to lethal anti-armour and anti-aircraft missiles. The level of threat no longer conforms to a sterile model of conflict spectrums. As the Americans learnt in Somalia, a humanitarian mission can spiral out of control and involve deadly combat against potent irregular forces.

Fortunately, we did not have to learn this bitter lesson in East Timor or the Solomon Islands. But we must adopt a reasonable-case risk assessment when we place our young men and women in harm's way.

The least we can do for them is to ensure that their vehicles and tactical groupings can withstand the most obvious threats. The Abrams tank is a tangible manifestation that we take this responsibility to our people seriously. On the other hand, I would be surprised if its relatively small presence within our land forces tips the balance with Government in opting for deployment to some far-off nirvana of armoured operations. There are simply not enough tanks being procured for such a fantasy to be plausible.

Air combat edge

Finally, I want to make it clear that we are not at risk of losing our regional edge in terms of air combat capability. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Indeed, we are developing a tightly integrated capability the like of which has never been seen in this region before. And the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) is merely the tip of the iceberg. It is misleading to consider the JSF in isolation from the Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft, the Jindalee Over-the-Horizon Radar system, Air-to-Air Refuellers, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Forward Operating Bases across Northern Australia.

This really will constitute a system of systems. The force multiplier effects of linking these elements of air and space power are quite staggering. We will have a powerful deterrent as well as significant punch, poised to avail ourselves of developments in smart-munitions, which is occurring at revolutionary speed.

And again we must never overlook the huge natural advantage that we enjoy through possessing a highly educated population with a proven track record of innovatively mastering new technology.

In each of these three areas we are on track to meet the directions given to us by Government. The whole will be greater than the sum of the parts. Indeed, the ADF will be more balanced and potent, more mobile and resilient than it has ever been in its history. Moreover, it will be exploiting the synergies of joint combat power in an unprecedented manner.

Looking ahead

My vision for the ADF in 2020 is of a seamless joint manoeuvre force, able to exploit real-time links between all our sensors and all our weapon systems throughout what might be termed an 'engagement network', which is focused by discriminating, innovative and mentally agile commanders. The Services will continue to provide expertise in the sea, land and air environments but the quality of effect delivered in any of these domains will not necessarily or inevitably come from that Service. The Chiefs and I are confident the force being developed through our DCP will maintain our axis of advance towards that end state.

I can say with hand on heart that the ADF is in terrific nick. We have been operating at a high tempo over the past five and a half years. That has given us a sharp edge. I am also delighted with the way that we have been able to transform while maintaining that operational tempo.

Our greatest challenge will be to recruit, train and retain the cream of our youth as demographic and labour market pressures increase. To date we have got it right, as anyone who has seen our men and women on operations will attest. And we have a great story to tell, a story over a century full of colour, challenge and opportunity for any Australian that wants to serve our nation and our people. I know we can sell that story!

The other challenge that we must meet is to ensure that we match the idealism and dedication of these people with the best available equipment, doctrine and support to achieve their missions. I believe that we are doing that—our DCP is on track, the assumptions underpinning it are sound and its implementation, while not perfect, is satisfactory.

The DCP is not cheap because the reasonable aspirations it seeks to fulfil are those of a significant, developed, middle power with a complex web of interests and influences across the world, in a period in which the weak can be powerful and the strong can be rendered apparently powerless. It is not an easy place to live and simplistic models or half measures will not help inform the policy debate.

When addressing the recent Sir Vernon Sturdee seminar on grand strategy I noted that it was particularly appropriate to commemorate the legacy of that fine soldier, a most professional commander and strategic adviser to government, and one who served at the highest level when our very survival as a nation was at stake.

In the decade to 1942 there was no shortage of experts telling Government that we had an affordable defence

strategy—the Singapore strategy made enormous financial sense, at least in the short term during peacetime. Grand strategy cannot be divorced from the national treasure and effort it will cost to realise, otherwise the effort is self defeating, but I would rather argue for sound policy, acknowledge gaps in the force structure and establish risk management protocols, than have a one-dimensional force structure that fails to deliver. We need to adapt resourcing to the strategy required not develop strategy based on the resourcing thought to be available.

We would do well to reflect on and avoid giving our successors another lesson in policy failure such as confronted this country very suddenly in 1941-42 after two decades of what, at best, could only be described as policy and resourcing complacency. Comforting myths may give us a warm inner glow, but they add little to our hard-headed consideration. General Sturdee was the Chief of the General Staff when our grand strategy collapsed, or as many would say, was shown to be made of straw. It was a critical period in our history, when we strove to establish true national command over our defence force and faced a menacing threat to our international security.

Healthy, informed and vigorous debates on our grand strategy are needed to help ensure our successors never again have to face the challenges Sturdee faced, as a strategist, as a commander, and as his government's principal military adviser at a time when our national freedom of action, and perhaps our very survival, hung in the balance. ♦

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