

Essays on Australian Defence

Paul Dibb

Reviewed by Michael O'Connor

Paul Dibb will need no introduction to readers. He has been a prominent figure in the national defence debate since his 1986 *Review of Australia's Defence Policy*. Currently, he is Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. This small (100-page) collection, published by SDSC as number 16 of the Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, brings together a number of previously published or unpublished papers written by Dibb between 2002 and 2005.

The first two chapters, written not long after the Al-Qa'eda attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, represent an attempt to explain what many regarded as a seachange in international security. Chapter 3 is focused upon describing the continuing importance of Asia to Australia's defence and points to the existence of significant trouble spots in the region. Dibb notes that, post-Cold War, the most threatening conflicts are between pairs of Asian nations.

Chapter 4 examines the question of whether, in the light of apparent changes, Australia needs a new defence policy. Dibb points to what he sees as a significant clash between the defence of Australia and its region, and a perceived push to reconfigure the ADF for global coalition operations. His concern is that the ADF cannot do both and should be structured for regional operations.

Chapter 5 looks at the challenges posed for Australia and the ADF by what he has called the arc of instability to Australia's north, while Chapter 6 is the text of an address to Japan's National Institute of Defence Studies and seeks to describe changes in Australian policy over the past two decades.

The remaining chapters comprise opinion articles previously published in Australian newspapers and reflect the author's concerns about what he clearly sees as a flawed change of direction in defence planning.

In his earlier chapters, Dibb seems to adopt the once popular – and populist – view that the terrorist attacks on the US represented a seachange in international conflict. Upon reflection and especially after the terrorist attack on Bali, he adopts the more realistic view that the counter-terrorist role of the ADF is generally limited except in the context of participation in distant coalition operations.

With Australia's involvement in Iraq and the concomitant push in Australia to expand the Army with main battle tanks and more personnel, Dibb expresses some alarm. He perceives a fundamental clash between the force structure requirements for distant and high-end war fighting, and the need for the fundamental defence of Australia and its immediate region. Coupled with this, he sees a danger that the bipartisan nature of the defence debate in Australia will be lost.

While I am not persuaded that the clash he perceives is as significant as he asserts, in one sense his concern is valid. As

he points out, the demand cannot be met without either a risky change in acquisition priorities or a substantial increase in defence funding.

Precisely! Dibb has usually associated with a school, largely Canberra and public service-based, that has refused to contemplate a significant increase in funding. This school does not believe that Australia can afford more. But surely, even if one accepts that the vast Federal outlays on health, education and welfare are sacrosanct, there remains considerable scope for economies by reducing the 'churning' of money from taxpayer to recipient through an increasingly complex, duplicated and costly Commonwealth bureaucracy. Further, as readers of *Defender*, are well aware, the scope for savings through radical administrative reform of the Defence organisation itself is substantial.

In some ways, this collection reflects a number of what seem to this reviewer to be fundamental intellectual flaws in a defence debate that has an artificially narrow agenda. The refusal to confront the question of funding is but one example.

Another is what seems to be an assumption that Australia can formulate a defence strategy and force structure in isolation from the real world. Dibb is on strong ground when he argues, as the book develops, that Australia must lift its eyes from the focus on terrorism and consider a longer future when conventional war might become more common. He points to a number of flashpoints in East and South Asia as possibly presenting a serious challenge to Australia in the medium term.

Yet he does not draw the obvious conclusion that the task of force structure planners must be to present governments with more than a single set of options for the use of military force. Of course, this implies that the planners must be prepared to go to government long before this and say 'we cannot provide what could credibly be needed because you won't give us the money.'

There are a number of weaknesses in the presentation. Dibb is inclined to construct 'straw men' and to depend heavily upon unsupported assertions. He confuses capabilities with elements of capabilities. For example, he regards airborne refuellers as a capability when they are in fact merely one element of an air combat capability.

Overall, this book contains much of value but it could have been improved with some solid editing or, better, written from scratch as a more coherent and detailed thesis. ♦

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