

9. LUNCHEON ADDRESSES

(d) "AUSTRALIA DEFENDING ASIA"

26 June, 1997

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Introduction

This paper could have been entitled AN ARMY WITHOUT A STRATEGY; A STRATEGY WITHOUT AN ARMY because that encapsulates what seems to me to have been a fundamental flaw in Australia's national security policy for most of our existence as a nation. Thus, in my view, we have a regional security strategy which implies the commitment of Australian forces to the support of regional allies but we do not have an army configured to support that strategy. At the same time, the army we do have has only the most limited combat capability and its size and structure are related more to resource constraints and bureaucratic bargaining than to any credible strategic guidance.

Therefore, the value of the ARMY 21 study and the recently announced reorganisation of the Army are, in the absence of a credible defence strategy, very limited in this presentation. I want to concentrate firstly on the strategy and then look briefly at the sort of army Australia needs to support that strategy.

An Historical Perspective

In the title, I suggested that Australia had a role in defending Asia and that this was a challenge for the 21st century. In fact, it was THE challenge for the 20th century, one which we met somewhat imperfectly and in spite of considerable division within the broad community, including the military community.

In all the literature on defence and security in Australia, it is difficult to find a compelling definition of what is meant by the term 'defence'. In the wider community, the lack of comprehension is even more widespread. In large part, Australia's history has contributed to this lack of definition. When Australia became a nation in 1901, defence was considered to be an imperial task. Australia's initial attempts to construct a defence force were driven by considerations of its likely commitments to imperial defence. Australian policy preferences were presented as inputs into the imperial planning process in London with some provision being made for the protection of Australian territory against limited direct attack.

In effect, this approach continued until the end of the Vietnam War. With greater independence conferred by the 1931 State of Westminster and adopted under the pressure of events during World War II, Australia constructed independent defence policies, structures and (arguably token) capabilities but still within the context of an alliance relationship. The defeat in Vietnam brought forth a review of defence policy which was said to be more 'self-reliant', that is, a policy which envisaged that Australian forces would be organised to fight under Australian command in the direct defence of Australia. In the discussion, 'direct defence' was assumed to mean a response to the descent of some invader on to Australian territory, albeit one on a small scale. Also implicit was the notion that Australia would be fighting alone against a single adversary.

This somewhat simplistic notion might have been adequate in the days of imperial defence and much slower global communications. It has been given legislative standing in the Preamble and Section 4(1) of the Defence Act 1903. The Preamble describes the Act as:

"An Act to provide for the Naval and Military defence and

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Protection of the Commonwealth and of the several States."

Section 4 (1), the definition section, does not define 'defence' but does define 'war' as:

"...any invasion or apprehended invasion of, or attack or apprehended attack on, Australia by an enemy or armed force."

while Section 5A extends the definition of 'Australia' to include Australia's external territories.

Of course, the Defence Act itself is little more than an administrative measure which sets out some limits upon the power of the executive government to use the Australian Defence Force in whatever way it wishes. Constitutionally, the ADF may be used in any way the executive government desires without reference to Parliament except to the extent that financial provision may be required. To this extent and, as history shows, the ADF is a much more flexible instrument than formal policy suggests.

Three defence White Papers published since the Vietnam war (in 1976, 1987, and 1994) also fail to define defence in any satisfactory or comprehensive way while popular concepts are still driven by the invasion scare of 1942. All of these sources imply that the 'Australia' which is to be defended can be described in geographical terms only. Thus, the notion of defending Australia's external territories and the sea-air gap do to some degree extend the definition of 'Australia' but continue to do so in geographic terms only.

More recently, official publications have attempted a greater sophistication. The Annual Report of the Defence Department defines the 'Defence Mission' thus:

"To Promote the Security of Australia, and to Protect its People and its interests".

The Defence Goals were said to be:

Within the framework of Government policy:

- \* to develop and maintain a national capacity to defeat any use of armed force against Australia; and
- \* to promote a regional and global security environment which enhances Australia's security by minimising the likelihood of armed force being used against Australia.

These definitions go some of the way to defining defence but leave open the question of what constitutes Australia and whether its interests might be somehow different from the mere geographic expression. They also suggest that security might mean something more than defence with the ADF having a wider role than mere territorial defence.

In reality, Australia's actual defence policy (especially in times of danger) has always responded to perceived dangers at great distances from Australia proper. In 1914, the Australian government recognised that the powerful German Asiatic Fleet based at Tsingtao (now Qingdao) in northern China represented a significant security problem for Australia, its trade routes and its ability to contribute to imperial defence. In effect, Australia made no overseas military commitments until the German Asiatic Fleet had been neutralised by attacks on its bases and communications stations, and then driven to destruction by the mobilisation of imperial squadrons in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

Between the wars and in the aftermath of the slaughter of World War 1, important military thinkers such as H D Wynter and J D Lavarack sought to reduce Australia's imperial commitments and focus upon the direct defence of continental Australia. Although successive governments paid lip service to the imperial defence policy (notably

by support of the Singapore strategy), the outbreak of World War II found Australia's armed forces not merely reduced to a shell but also committed by force of circumstances to a passive defence of Australia. Pressure from London was responsible for the raising of the Second AIF and the implementation of the Empire Air Training Scheme. After the fall of France in May/June 1940, popular pressure as much as policy was responsible for the large expansion of overseas deployments which nevertheless found Australia ill-prepared to meet the Japanese attack of which considerable warning had been given.

Even then, Australia's forces were committed to operations beyond Australia proper if only because that was where the challenge lay. Government propaganda was partly designed to sustain fears of invasion so as to mobilise the community rather than to respond to an actual threat. Intelligence available to the government indicated as early as mid-1942 that Japan was neither able nor willing to invade Australia.

By late 1943, policy debates in Australia were beginning to focus on whether Australia should even continue to fight. There was a significant body of opinion which argued that, the threat of invasion having vanished, Australia had done enough. The more sophisticated view espoused by Evatt and Blamey, among others, held that Australian interests were still engaged and that Australia's post-war influence would be measured in part by our continuing in the war.

Australia's contributions to post-war regional conflicts in Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam were also driven by perceptions that their outcome could influence Australia's security even though this country's territory was not directly threatened with invasion or armed attack. Thus actual Australian policy has always responded - as it had to - to contemporary perceptions of threats to interests, broadly defined, but defence planning and rhetorical policy still seem to be driven by the historically irrelevant and inflexible territorial imperative, with the result that Australia was almost always ill-prepared for the commitments it made.

The need for a revision of the traditional approach is driven by three important factors:

- \* recognition that Australia's real and developing interests extend far beyond Australian territory;
- \* changes to the nature of armed conflict; and
- \* the need to engage public support for military commitments that may appear remote and unimportant.

#### Change is Here

In a frank admission in the introduction to the 1991/92 annual DEFENCE REPORT, the authors, the then Chief of the Defence Force General Peter Gration and Secretary of Defence Tony Ayers, admitted that Australia's strategic policy is now based on regional security.

The key paragraph is worth quoting in full. The authors write:

"This regional approach is an inevitable outcome of the policies set out in the 1987 Defence White Paper. The process since then has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Collectively we understand better now than we did then that we will defend ourselves with and in Asia - not against Asia. (my emphasis)

Although that statement is now more than five years old, there is little evidence that:

- \* it has penetrated into all corners of the defence community much less the wider Australian community, or

the implications of the change have been translated into force structure, doctrine and training.

To a large extent, we are still driven by the myth of 'self-reliance' which, however it is defined and redefined, is simply irrelevant to any realistic defence policy.

Self-reliance was never more than an appeal to crude nationalism coupled with a revulsion that arose from the West's defeat in Vietnam. The twin notions implicit in self-reliance that we could:

- \* pick and choose our involvement in any given conflicts; and
- \* rationally structure our forces to defeat a small-scale attack on Australia after all else was lost,

were surely as naive as expecting to get 100/1 from a bookie on the Melbourne Cup favourite. The concepts of 'self-reliance' and 'credible contingencies' upon which it was based could only be defined by using a new dictionary.

Despite a tendency to see the end of the Cold War as a defining strategic moment, that event was itself the product of a much more fundamental change. The communications revolution of the past 20 years or so has so shrunk the world that the basic concept of national defence is hardly relevant for those countries (or communities) whose economic, social and security interests extend far beyond their national borders. In my view, Australia is such a country.

Defining a nation's security interests ought not to be too difficult. Indeed, it ought to be a fundamental measure of national maturity as well as an essential planning task. Manifestly in a democracy, it ought to be a matter for public discussion if only because mobilising public support for the defence of interests which have achieved broad agreement will be much easier.

Despite assertions of intellectual rigour, such discussion of security interests as does occur tends to be couched in vague conceptual terms. Australia's security interests should be capable of reasonably precise definition and be set in a hierarchy which can then define strategy and force structure.

Clearly, a primary and fundamental interest is the security of Australian territory and its inhabitants. This however tends to be the only precise interest that is ever stated. Even so, its acceptance raises further questions such as the priority to be assigned to the protection of Australia's offshore territories such as Cocos (Keeling), Christmas or Norfolk Islands where the numbers of inhabitants are small, the strategic implications of their loss minimal and the difficulty of defence substantial.

An interest which is often assumed, especially in media comment, is the protection of Australians in foreign countries. This 'interest' was invoked at the time of the first military coup in Fiji in May 1987 and again more recently in the case of Australians kidnapped by Khmer Rouge forces in Cambodia. The interest tends to be derivative from one commonly asserted in the much more powerful and assertive United States but it is one which has driven Australian policy (as in Fiji) and, for all the limitations on our capability, could do so again. There is a case for some public discussion of this 'interest' to define its extent and to identify the limits imposed by the capability, international law and the rest.

Economic interests will impinge ever more on national security, especially for a significant trading nation like Australia. While the use of armed force in support of economic interests has obvious limits, neither can its utility be excluded totally. Australia's economy is heavily dependent upon overseas trade

Whether it be by sea or air. Protection of the cargoes and their carriers (regardless of flag) is a vital Australian interest shared with our trading partners.

In less definable (but no less important) terms, Australia has a fundamental interest in contributing towards maintaining peace. For a community which could not tolerate political, economic or social isolation, a peaceful international community is one which increasingly will not tolerate the use of military force to resolve international or even intra-national disputes.

For all the mixed results, international responses to crises in the Falklands, Kuwait, Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia suggest that, so long as Australia remains a committed member of the global community, it cannot easily be isolated by an aggressor.

#### A Strategic Hierarchy

In effect, the Defence of Australia (DOA) strategy surrenders - or assumes the loss of - Australia's strategic glacis comprising long approach routes and a shield of friendly nations with whom Australia has alliances, albeit of a non-binding nature. Any attempt to bypass the shield challenges the aggressor to protect very long and therefore increasingly vulnerable supply lines. This difficulty is by no means insuperable but overcoming it will take a long time, measured more in decades rather than years as well as recognisable changes in capability. In effect, Australia has a huge space to trade against the time needed to overcome that space. That factor suggests that Australia's defence priority ought to be directed towards preserving the strategic glacis rather than assuming its loss. If, over a period, the glacis is whittled away, then a reassessment of strategy and force capabilities may be required but to do so now represents a resort to despair. Moreover it is likely to contribute to dismay and disillusion among our allies to the extent that the isolation assumed in the DOA strategy would become reality much more quickly than it needs to be. This reality suggests a hierarchy of strategies which is implicit in current security policy but which requires some re-ordering.

What all this means in terms of setting priorities for our defence strategy is that:

- \* Australia's primary security interest remains ensuring in conjunction with others the security of South-East Asia and the South Pacific. This is achieved by a policy of active engagement, military as well as political and economic, with those regions so as to present them as peaceful areas capable of defending themselves.
- \* Secondly a continuing commitment to the Western coalition, principally through the United States alliance, gives us influence as well as access to the best technological developments in conventional weaponry. But it also means matching performance with Rhetoric not merely in the eyes of the media machines but especially in the eyes of our allies. It becomes a matter of equality of sacrifice and reasonable burden-sharing.
- \* Thirdly, our position as a nation of economic and political significance gives us leverage in supporting the development of an effective UN-based security structure in the medium to longer term. It must be emphasised, however, that all these considerations may well demand sacrifices not demonstrably tied to traditional Australian interests in the absence of a more sophisticated and substantial national debate.
- \* Finally, while direct threats of some dimension to Australian territory remain a theoretical possibility, they are increasingly remote and should not be a determinant of policy. If they are, they risk stultifying the development of a more realistic and

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destructive security policy. More specifically, maintaining an expensive infrastructure for the big war will waste precious resources.

#### The implications for the ADF

Such a strategic hierarchy clearly implies that the ADF should be configured primarily for operations in South-East Asia and the South Pacific, rather than for the direct defence of the Australian mainland. Herein lies my concern that we have a strategy without an army and an army without a strategy.

Overall, the navy and air force do have the structure and capacity (and, generally the doctrine) for regional security operations. Some refinement is probably necessary to ensure that the forces can be deployed and can operate from overseas bases relatively quickly. More negotiations with regional allies will be needed to establish both our readiness to act in their support as well as our specific needs. More practice is required to assure operational compatibility but these matters which are in hand and are progressing quite well.

The Army remains the problem. The whole focus of ARMY 21 and on the reorganisation announced by the minister is on an ability to operate in Australia. Given a combination of the global communications revolution, our distant and recent history, and the fact that we have a shooting war going on in our closest neighbour, that organisational focus is simply wrong. Because the potential for future conflicts involving Australian interests is so extensive, so narrow a concept of operations for the army possesses within itself the seeds of future crisis. Even if one accepts the strategic notion of the sea-air gap, the reality is that much of Indonesia and all of Papua New Guinea lies within that sea-air gap. Who could confidently say, for example, that the Australian Army will never again be required, perhaps at short notice, for combat in Papua New Guinea? Yet the army lacks suitable equipment for operations in that country, its doctrine is unsuitable, and its vaunted expertise in jungle warfare and counter-insurgency has been all but lost.

Without embarking upon an extended explanation, let me suggest first that Australia does not need large forces. I would suggest however that the Army should be capable of deploying a combat-ready brigade (or task force) with heavy weapons by sea at short notice, and then sustaining that brigade with replacements more or less indefinitely. Basically, we need something like the US Marine Expeditionary Brigade, that is a force that can be moved quickly to a theatre of operations. Such a force-in-being is above all a force for stability but the Australian Army today is not.

#### Conclusion

One of the most depressing aspects of the task I have been given is to witness the same old arguments being peddled for an isolationism which Australia, as never before, cannot afford.

It would have been a neat solution if Wynter and Lavarack had been proved right back in the 1920s and 1930s. Ever since, Australia has sought that neat solution which keeps us out of trouble. But Wynter and Lavarack were wrong and, for their pains, they had to command forces in New Guinea which had to learn their trade under the most difficult of conditions. The mistakes they made were, firstly, to believe that an enemy would attack us on our terms, and, secondly, that someone else would look after the neighbourhood, leaving us to enjoy a lotus existence.

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