



SUBMISSION TO THE SECRETARIAT OF THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE POSTURE REVIEW

Background

On 22 June 2011, the Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith MP, announced that the Department of Defence will undertake a Force Posture Review to assess whether the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is correctly geographically positioned to meet Australia's modern and future strategic and security challenges.

Aim

The aim of this submission is to address a number of key considerations relevant to the ADF Posture Review.

This submission has been prepared by the **Returned & Services League of Australia – South Australia Branch (RSL-SA)**.

Scope

This submission does not address all of the matters Raised in the Terms of Reference. It seeks only to inform the Secretariat about certain matters based on the knowledge and experiences of members of RSL-SA. The focus is on the effects of remote basing on serving personnel and their families.

Key Considerations

The emphasis of the review appears to be to identify suitable locations for future ADF bases based on '... an array of emerging strategic and security influences', in particular:

- the increasing global strategic significance of the Asia Pacific region and Indian Ocean rim; and
- energy security and security issues associated with expanding offshore resource exploitation in our North West and Northern approaches.

Thus, the review is primarily about hedging against increasingly active and aggressive Chinese naval and air power. It is also about hedging against the possibility of the United States deciding to discontinue or to diminish its willingness to act as a stabilising force in the Asia Pacific and around the Indian Ocean rim.

The review suggests that options for bases will be developed over a 25 year horizon. By their very nature, the acquisition and development of new Defence facilities and its associated funding have very long lead times. Strategic circumstances change far more quickly than can Government decision making and facilities development compared to these lead times. Therefore, any decision to establish a new base needs to have a very clear *raison d'être*. Heavy investments in new facilities will potentially lock in ADF force elements to certain bases and locations for lengthy periods, potentially well after strategic circumstances change and no longer justify such basing.

While the Terms of Reference and other available Government information on this review do not dictate that new bases will be established in Western Australia, particularly the remote regions to the North West of the continent, there is no doubt that such options for the new 'front line' of Australia's defence would be considered if the emerging strategic and security influences as noted in the Terms of Reference are truly relevant.

In the 1990s when the Army Presence in the North (APIN) project was being implemented, many Defence personnel warned against the notion of basing the vast majority of the Army's combat units in Darwin and Townsville. There were many reasons for this including:

- lack of employment opportunities for spouses
- poorer education options
- the vast distance from the members' and spouses' extended families (most people are recruited from the Southern and Eastern cities)
- the very high costs, either to Defence or individual members, to visit and maintain contact with those extended families
- unwillingness to undertake most of a career in the tropics away from the extended family
- likely higher separation and divorce rates
- unwillingness to work and live in an oppressive climate for extended periods
- higher living costs experienced in remote areas.
- reduction in training opportunities due to environmental limitations imposed by a lengthy wet season.

Notwithstanding considerable efforts undertaken by the Department of Defence to ensure a high standard of living for serving personnel and their families, delivered at enormous cost, most of those concerns expressed by many serving members in the 1990s have come to fruition.

We have already seen the effects of such foolhardy decisions with the relocation of a large part of Army's 1st Brigade from Darwin to Adelaide. The increasing use of Cultana Training Area in South Australia by Darwin-based units reflects the very obvious limitation of being unable to effectively train in the Top End due to the wet season. Additionally, the Darwin-Adelaide rail link allows ready movement of vehicles and equipment to and from the Top End.

The Air Force experiences similar problems for families based at Tindal. Even the 'two ocean' basing policy for Navy has not been without its problems from a personnel perspective.

Indeed, this is not just a problems of the tropics as bases like Puckapunyal (country Victoria) have become increasingly unpopular amongst Army personnel and their families due to lack of adequate education and job opportunities for spouses.

The aspirations of serving members and their families reflect the aspirations of the wider community. People want good schools for their children, jobs for their spouses and access to the range of sporting, entertainment and social opportunities available to most Australians. Where these aspirations cannot be achieved then alternative sources of employment will be sought.

In the 'war for talent' Defence must offer potential and current and members a number of things which attract and retain them. Apart from a good career, training and pay, where you are likely to work is a major influence for many. Suggesting to potential and current members that a large percentage of their careers will be spent in remote localities is not smart. Apart from the very large cost per person, it is not sustainable. Such a posture will result in a similar work cycle that applies to many who work in remote mining communities. Such people are happy to live and work remotely for a while, usually because they are paid very well, but they always want to return to more traditional work and lifestyle arrangements.

Defence capability is primarily generated through its people. Having high calibre equipment and well developed facilities is important but useless without well trained people in the right numbers. Retention rates are subject to many things, especially economic circumstances and civilian work opportunities. However, Defence has long recognised that most serving members need respite from remote and/or tropical environments. Basing 'too much' of the ADF in such locations will not allow this to occur.

The mining industry dominates much of the Western half of the continent and brings with it a unique set of circumstances which need to be considered. Mines often operate on a 'fly in-fly out' basis. Mine employees generate little direct spending for the small towns near where they work. Many businesses and local government entities find it difficult to recruit and retain employees as they cannot compete with the mines for pay and conditions. In South Australia, cities like Port Augusta spend a lot of time and money training local people only to lose them to higher paid jobs in the mines at Olympic Dam. Defence personnel posted to such communities, if bases were established nearby, would find themselves in similar situations. Would it be sensible for Defence to place highly trained personnel in locations where the temptation of higher paid employment exists? Significant numbers of Defence personnel, especially those with technical qualifications, already find employment in the mines. Even with the payment of

remote locality allowances to compensate for higher costs, the gap between mine employees and 'locals' will be considerable. The mining companies will see Defence personnel as a lucrative source of well-trained employees.

It is not intended to comment in detail on strategic matters in this submission. However, a few brief points need to be made. Whilst it is acknowledged that maintaining many bases across Australia is costly, over-rationalisation of the Defence estate is not strategically sound. Too few bases based in remote areas become easy targets for disruption by potential adversaries.

What is the advantage in putting large concentrations of ADF force elements in bases at the perceived 'front line'? Such bases are readily identifiable by our adversaries and could be isolated from other Defence force elements if military force was applied. Forward basing does not generate sufficient strategic or tactical agility necessary to deal with the range of threats which might be expected.

Significant elements of the ADF have the ability to deploy quickly to any part of the world to deal with emergencies. This is evidenced by the ADF's many recent contributions to natural disasters within our immediate region. Our Special Forces are also trained and ready to deploy quickly. Basing near a potential flash point does not, in itself, provide deterrence to a potential threat, nor does it guarantee being able to concentrate sufficient military capability at the point it is required when it is required. Our coastline is vast and wherever you base our forces there will be gaps. Additionally, bare bases provide options for lodgement in Australia by our adversaries.

A key tenet espoused when APIN was undertaken, was 'knowing our region', ie. the Top End, Kimberley etc. Whilst it is acknowledged that much knowledge and experience has been gained about operating in Northern Australia, gaining experience does not mean that you have to live in a place. Alternatives include:

- training in a variety of environments in which you might need to undertake military operations
- developing better rapid response capabilities
- improving surveillance, early warning and intelligence capabilities
- increasing use of Reserve regional force surveillance units
- rotating force elements through bare bases.

Conclusion

Recognition of the need for a cost-effective approach to basing is reflected in recent basing changes for Army in South Australia. That was a sensible move which is greatly appreciated by serving soldiers and their families.

The ADF Force Posture Review has the potential to deliver unrealistic outcomes for future basing of the ADF which will, in turn, lead to a degradation of morale and retention, whilst not achieving the cost savings and capability enhancements that it seeks. The ability of the ADF to deliver a sustainable solution for current and potential serving members could be very difficult if the right solution is not created and an over-emphasis on basing 'near the threat' is created.

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16 September 2011