

Australian Defence Force Posture Review

Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales Submission¹

In response to the Australian Government's public call for submissions to its Force Posture Review, a preparatory study to the 2014 Defence White Paper, the Institute made the following submission on 11 September 2011.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales contributes to the defence and security debate in Australia. Last May, it held an international dialogue on the global security outlook, with the keynote address delivered by retired Indian vice-admiral Arun Kumar Singh. A copy of the dialogue proceedings is attached². It provides an excellent background to the strategic issues which Australia must face to 2030 and constitutes the strategic context for this submission, which will address four of the Review's terms of reference, viz.:

- the strategic environment Australia needs to be positioned to respond to up to 2030;
- the capacity of the ADF, given its posture, to respond to offshore activities;
- the impact of domestic issues on the ADF's force posture; and
- basing options for Force 2030 across Australia.

Australia's Strategic Environment to 2030

The United States and China are now strategic rivals and, while the United States remains our principal strategic ally, China is now our major trading partner. This will become an increasingly difficult arrangement to manage, particularly as Australia is a principal source of China's raw materials and is no longer in a strategic backwater – global power is shifting in our direction as the Indo-Pacific region becomes a locus of great power competition³.

Australia has three broad strategic options to 2030: a continued strong alliance with the United States; armed neutrality, with an ability to operate independently, as India does; or an alliance with one of the other two major emerging powers, China or India. The assumption in this submission is that Australia will continue its strong alliance with the United States, which has many implications, the most important from a strategic viewpoint, being:

- The United States, with 13 different aircraft-carrier groups, is likely to dominate power projection and remain the world's predominant military power up to 2030, providing its economy can continue to sustain that position.

- In continuing to develop its influence in the Indo-Pacific region, however, the United States will be required to share influence with China and India.
- The United States would take the lead role in any situation likely to have a major impact on security in our region, with the support of Australia and other partners.
- Consistent with the 1969 Guam Doctrine, a continuing alliance between United States and Australia will require Australia to be able to operate independently within Australia and our immediate region⁴ (as in East Timor 1999), at least to the extent of providing the manpower for our own defence.
- The alliance with the United States will involve an increased presence of United States forces and prepositioned equipment in Australia, including increased access for United States forces to Australian training and exercise areas and test ranges, and greater use by them of Australian facilities and ports⁵. In return, the United States will continue to provide Australia with access to shared surveillance, intelligence, the Technical Cooperation Programme, cyber-security developments, off-the-shelf proven and developing military equipment and systems, and the continued presence of United States prime defence contractors as part of our defence industrial base.

The strategic issues within the Indo-Pacific region, besides energy production and climate change, include extreme poverty, limited arable land, terrorism, marine pollution, drug and people trafficking, gun-running, religious fundamentalism, piracy-armed robbery, a nuclear 'neighbourhood', and natural disasters. Its commercial sea lanes and littoral zones are likely to be important segments of the global battle-space, replacing relatively ordered battlefields.

Ability to Respond to Various Offshore Activities

ADF mainland bases are well positioned geographically to contribute to operations in the Indo-Pacific region and further afield.

¹The Institute's principal officer-bearers prepared this submission. It represents their personal views.

²*United Service* 62 (3) September 2011 (enclosed). Also available at www.rusinsw.org.au

³Minister for Defence Stephen Smith, in a speech at The Brookings Institution, Washington, on 27 July 2011, noted that: "In this century, the Asia-Pacific will become the world's centre of gravity".

⁴The ADF's primary operating environment contains Australia's sovereign, offshore and economic territories, including Cocos, Christmas, Heard, McDonald, Macquarie and Norfolk Islands, the Australian Antarctic Territory and the 200 nautical mile economic exclusion zones around them. Its strategic centre is the sea-air gap to our north.

⁵Minister Smith at the The Brookings Institution, Washington, on 27 July 2011.

Fleet Base West (Fremantle) is well-placed as a base for naval deployments throughout the Indian Ocean and the Indonesian archipelago to the South China Sea, including protection of commercial sea lanes. It proved itself as a major allied base for these purposes in 1944-45. Fleet Base East (Sydney) similarly proved itself as a Pacific Ocean naval base in World War II. Both bases are well-placed to support missions in the Southern Ocean and to Antarctica.

Army mounting areas for deployments into Melanesia (Townsville) and Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines (Darwin) are also well-placed. Each base is supported by strategic-lift airfields and a deepwater port.

Naval, military and air force deployments to support operations in our wider region and/or across the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean rims could be mounted from a range of suitable bases across Australia, often the home bases of the assets to be deployed.

Impact of Domestic, Demographic and Economic Issues on ADF Posture

The principal impact of domestic, demographic and economic issues on ADF posture to 2030 is likely to be in the north-west and north of the mainland. The growth in these areas will continue to severely stretch our capacity to protect and defend them.

The North-West Shelf off the Pilbara, produces >40 per cent of Australia's oil and liquid natural gas (LNG), and is Australia's foremost foreign exchange earner. Adjacent areas include the Browse Basin off the Kimberley; and the Bayu-Undan gas fields in the Timor Sea. The Pilbara holds the world's third-largest iron-ore producer (15 per cent of global output) and raised AUD 26.82 billion in 2009. These resources are mainly shipped from local ports direct to customers in China, India and other Asian destinations, underlining the present and growing strategic and economic importance of north-western Australia and the Indian Ocean.

The growth of mineral and energy projects in the Pilbara, Kimberley and Timor Sea will underpin the national economy to 2030. Exploitation of these resources, however, depends on oil and gas wells, pipelines, mines, railways, ports, production and support facilities. These in turn require monitoring, surveillance and protection, backed up by a mechanism to rapidly deploy a more significant deterrent, e.g. the Timor Sea wells are connected by a vulnerable 500-km pipeline to Darwin Harbour. The gas is then piped south through remote terrain.

Adding to these challenges, the area is sparsely settled and poorly served with strategic infrastructure. The Northern Territory, an immense land area, has a sparse population (<230,000) concentrated along the north-south Stuart Highway linking five growth centres. Only two national highways and the Adelaide-to-Darwin railway link the Territory with adjoining states. It has five commercial airports and two military air-bases (Tindal and Darwin). Western Australia, with a greater land-mass and longer coastline, also is sparsely settled. It has eight main population centres; a military air-base at Pearce (near Perth), and bare-bases at Learmonth and Curtin

(near Derby); a railway and national highway from Adelaide to Perth; and another national highway linking Perth to Darwin – largely coastal, it skirts rugged terrain in major parts of the north. Fremantle is the site of Fleet Base West; and there are several deepwater ports, including ones at Albany, in the Pilbara and at Broome.

Basing Options for Force 2030 across Australia

The strategic posture of the ADF, especially its bases and training areas, was addressed extensively when Australia's strategic emphasis was on 'continental defence' in the 1980s. We have since gradually acquired/fine-tuned the range of headquarters, bases and training areas needed to meet our strategic needs – strategic headquarters, logistic base areas, airfields, two major naval bases (Fremantle and Sydney) and military training areas in the south; and forward operating bases (Darwin and Townsville), mounting areas, training areas, airfields [Learmonth, Curtin, Tindal, Darwin, and Scherger (near Weipa)] and patrol boat bases (Darwin, Cairns) in the north, where civilian aerodromes at many towns also provide some flexibility for the air deployment of light forces. These facilities are well located strategically. A case can be made for duplication or further dispersion of some of these facilities, including the patrol boat bases (e.g. a new base at Broome), but this is a secondary issue.

There are two strategic concerns. The first is whether, in the event of significant conflict in our region, the current military bases and training areas in the north, especially in Queensland, would be adequate as operational training and mounting areas to accommodate an expanded ADF, and/or additional allied forces stationed in Australia. It is doubtful whether Townsville and Shoalwater Bay would be adequate for these purposes. In World War II, Cairns, its adjacent beaches for amphibious training, and the Atherton Tableland, proved invaluable for this purpose and they again may be needed.

The second major strategic deficiency is the grossly inadequate 'internal lines of communication', especially from our major defence industry and logistics facilities located in the south-east to the strategically vital Pilbara, Kimberley and Darwin areas in the north-west. Indeed, support of our increasingly complex defence platforms deployed in the north relies most heavily on our southern-based defence industry. This is not a new issue. It was a severe problem when Perth and Darwin were at risk of Japanese invasion in World War II and robbed Australia of the advantages that normally accrue to a continental defender – the ability to rapidly transfer and concentrate forces and combat supplies at vital points. In 1942, we were dependent largely on slow sea transport to convey troops and heavy materiel from eastern Australia to the west. The shipping was subject to interdiction and the ports to blockading and mining. There has been little improvement to this infrastructure since, other than completion of the Alice Springs-Darwin railway and upgrading of National Highway 1. Overall, rail transport and strategic roads across the interior through key logistic nodes (e.g. Alice Springs) remain abysmal. Air

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Carruthers as platoon commander, was also killed. Major Bruce McQualter died of his head wounds in hospital after twelve days.

The engineers did a good forensic job of working out what had caused this disaster. The lead APC was hit by what is now described as an improvised explosive device. This was a buried, recycled, 5-inch US naval shell. It was rigged up with a detonator and battery. Pressure from the passing vehicle closed the wire circuit, detonating the explosion. The force was considerable, throwing the 11-tonne APC three metres off to one side and leaving a 2 metre by 1 metre crater.

As Major McQualter and the medics went forward to assist the wounded, one of them stepped on an M16 mine. This "jumping jack", with its half kilogram of TNT and a killing range of 25 metres, caused most of the casualties. Two more M16 mines were detected by the sappers in the immediate area as they carried out their search.

At that time, there were no clear instructions as to how to respond when it becomes evident that a party is stalled in a minefield. Logic declares that there should be no movement until sappers have cleared paths. One soldier, a corporal section commander, swears to this day that he said he would shoot me if I walked any further after stepping out of the helicopter that had dropped me off. I have no recollection of this, but fortunately he did not follow through with his threat.

After this incident, when personnel found themselves in a minefield, it became standard procedure for all personnel to freeze until the area had been cleared by sappers. This must have presented some agonising dilemmas, preventing soldiers from going to the aid of wounded comrades.

My role as RMO was simple first aid, albeit in a very trying situation. Our shell dressings were made in England and date-stamped April 1915. Half-a-century

later they were still perfectly serviceable. Triage was the other important function. This is the process of ranking casualties in order for evacuation to ensure that the severely wounded but salvageable soldiers were evacuated ahead of the mortally wounded or those with non-life threatening wounds.

Conclusion

Mine incidents continued to plague the Australian forces throughout the Vietnam War and at times accounted for over half the casualties. To compound the grief, most of the mines had been lifted skilfully by the enemy from allied minefields and re-laid to the enemy's advantage. The controversy over the use of mines continues to this day.

The Author: Australian born but brought up in Kenya, Dr White graduated in medicine from the University of Sydney and served as a doctor in the Australian Army for five years. This included a year in Vietnam where he was mentioned-in-despatches. Subsequently, he practised privately as a dermatologist in Sydney for 32 years before retiring in 2010. During this time, he was a visiting medical officer at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and a clinical senior lecturer at the University of Sydney. He also served as an Army Reservist in the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps, attaining the rank of colonel and being awarded the Reserve Force Decoration. In 2009, he was appointed a member in the General Division of the Order of Australia for contributions to remote area dermatological practice and education. [Photo of Dr White: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]

Reference

O'Neill, Robert J. (1968). *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, 1966/67* (Cassell Australia: Melbourne).

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transport is somewhat better now, particularly for troop transportation, but in spite of the acquisition of heavy-lift C-17 aircraft, they remain grossly inadequate for the heavy war supplies, particularly during the wet season. In essence, our internal lines remain in a piteous state and constitute a critical strategic weakness.

While this problem has been recognised in previous strategic analyses, the vast distances and major costs involved, coupled with policy insistence that infrastructure construction be cost-effective commercially, have conspired to largely cement the *status quo*. Given the international strategic and economic importance of the Pilbara/Kimberley/Darwin area now and the investment pouring into it, coupled with the projected Australian mining profits tax, it would seem timely to re-address this issue.

Conclusion

As a consequence of Australia's World War II legacy and ongoing updating since, the ADF is well

positioned geographically on continental Australia, in terms of bases, training areas and staging areas for overseas deployments. Its current posture should largely meet Australia's strategic challenges through to 2030, although there is scope for some fine-tuning at the margins, particularly for the acquisition of expanded base and training areas in the Cairns/Atherton Tableland area, and a patrol boat base at Broome. The principal deficiency, however, remains strategic logistics – specifically the inadequate 'lines of communication' (logistic nodes, rail and road) linking the continent from east to west and south to north. Hitherto, this has proved a largely intractable problem, but, given the strategic and economic importance of Australia's north and northwest, every effort should be made now to address it.

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