Reviews

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Niche Wars: Australia in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001–2014

John Blaxland, Marcus Fielding and Thea Gellerfy (eds)

ANU Press, Canberra, 2020

Reviewed by Andrew Maher

Released in late 2020, Niche Wars: Australia in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001–2014 offers intriguing insights into the character of Australia’s tailored contributions to our ‘long war’ in the Middle East and South Asia. As this year will mark the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, it is pertinent to reflect upon the tactical actions that flowed from Prime Minister Howard’s invocation of the ANZUS Treaty. By providing a wide range of personal reflections of events of that time, Niche Wars captures lessons for today’s national security and policy professionals.

The collection of perspectives is more than an assortment of interviews or reflective musings from participants involved in these military operations. Instead, it is like the proverbial blind men’s description of an elephant: a snake-like trunk of invidious counterinsurgency on the ground; a policy bulk in the post-9/11 era; and stout but wrinkly legs of interdepartmental contributions. Accounts are thus rich in individuality and coherent in aggregate. Robert Hill (former Senator and Minister for Defence) and Ric Smith (former Secretary of Defence) bring us into the Cabinet Room and the political deliberations that guided our military contributions, while senior officers, such as Admiral Chris Barrie and General Peter Leahy, provide the military perspective on these missions. Command reflections from Army officers Dan McDaniel and Anthony Rawlins then expose the challenges in translating these larger strategic interests into tactical actions. A broad swathe of non-military perspectives are also provided, ranging from the provision of aid in conflict environments through to policing challenges of corruption and counternarcotics, to engagement with the media. Dr Alan Ryan rounds out these perspectives, reminding us that ‘all wars end, and the military will play a constructive role only if they have established a close and constructive
relationship with the peace builders'. The contributors to this book reflect this whole-of-government approach, an approach that evolved within these conflict environments.

While it may not have been the editors’ intent, three key themes emerge from the individual accounts provided: the tactical aggregation of actions for strategic effect; poor strategic policy and coordination; and the absence of robust strategic thinking about our interventions. Consequently, *Niche Wars* serves a broad national security practitioner audience.

**Tactical aggregation of actions for strategic effect**

Current Deputy Chief of Army, Major General Rawlins (a lieutenant colonel commanding Overwatch Battle Group – West in Iraq in 2006–7), speaks candidly about his frustrations in responding appropriately to the tactical situations he faced, shackled by restrictive command guidance. His frustrations reveal Dan Marston’s criticism of policymakers and military commanders applying ‘blanket solutions’ without understanding the need for context. Marston highlights that veterans will well understand that ‘Basra was different from Al-Anbar, which was different from Mosul in Iraq’. His perspective and nuance helps to convey the necessity to ‘go small’ in understanding tactical context if one is to develop effective policy. Politics is, indeed, local. The Anbar Awakening (in 2006), which ‘flipped’ the Sunni tribes in Iraq from supporting al-Qaeda, had unique political and social characteristics that limited its replication elsewhere. Robert Hill amplifies this point:

> Both conflicts illustrated how little we in the West knew or understood about both societies ... We do not fight wars in a vacuum, and politicians need to better appreciate the social and cultural environments to which we send our forces.\(^3\)

**Poor strategic policy and coordination**

Sometimes Australian national policy appeared inconsistent. The potential for a whole-of-government approach was missed because objectives were disconnected and execution was siloed. An example is illuminated by Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers Col Speedie and Steve Mullins, who describe the initial AFP commitment in October 2007 as having a heavy weighting towards combating the transnational counter-narcotics challenge. This orientation was confirmed by the 2008 National Security Committee of Cabinet endorsement of the AFP concept of operations. General Stanley McCrystal

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highlighted how the narcotics industry fuelled the insurgency in 2009, when he assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Although RAN maritime patrolling had long included a narcotics interdiction component, it was not until 2011 that Australian Army elements began nexus targeting, directing efforts against the overlap of the Afghan insurgency, narcotics processing and smuggling and governmental corruption. The counternarcotics challenge serves as an example of a four-year absence of coherent strategic policy, which Niche Wars fails to pick up or make explicit. The varying perspectives of the book’s contributors will allow the astute reader to identify other seams created by different departmental orientations and cultures that these Middle Eastern conflicts illuminated.

An absence of strategic thinking about our interventions

Perhaps because of such seams, the book makes the case that success in our niche wars has proved elusive. Peter Leahy illuminates the very British conclusion of the Chilcott Report, which found that United Kingdom’s interests in Iraq ‘fell far short of strategic success’. Given ongoing security concerns in Afghanistan and Iraq post-2014, such a charge could similarly be levelled against Australia’s interests. A possible cause for such failure is the absence of robust strategic thinking about our interventions – the third key theme of this book. John Blaxland sets this tone upfront:

> Without a holistic counterinsurgency campaign for Afghanistan, let alone Uruzghan, much of the direction of tactical actions fell on the shoulders of soldiers and commanders. In the absence of a compelling overarching strategy, the main campaign plans left Australian and coalition forces with an inadequate raison d’être for the brutal fight they were tasked to undertake.

This sentiment was not an isolated opinion. Robert Hill laments that combating the insurgencies that subsequently evolved in both Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘should have received more thought’. Incoherence in our strategic thinking is evidenced as Ric Smith argues that democratisation ‘was certainly not on our agenda’, although he notes Prime Minister Howard’s statement on 24 August 2005, that ‘if democracy takes root [in Afghanistan] ... then a massive blow

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5 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, p 297.
6 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, p 9.
7 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, chapter 1.
8 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, p 35.
is struck in the war against terrorism’. What was it? Did Australia seek to support the growth of democracy in Afghanistan (as a counter to terrorism and insurgency)? The absence of a clear answer highlights deficiencies that the authors examine regarding Australian strategic thinking.

Peter Leahy succinctly identifies the challenge the Army should take from our Niche Wars.

The Australian Army has tended to focus on developing skills at the tactical level and up to the operational level of war. We have tended to leave the strategic level to others to manage. That three key themes from Niche Wars pertain to deficiencies in formulating strategy poses issues for the national security community. The first of these is the need to consider how Australian strategic policy might be improved. Dan McDaniel describes a clarity in his counterterrorism mission in 2001–02; however, he subsequently identifies a shift in tasking over 2002 and laments the absence of clarity in subsequent operational tasking. This suggests that Australia’s strategic policymakers were poorly served by the military’s application of ‘operational art’ or ‘campaigning’ and manifest through the lack of discernible ‘operations’, with clearly articulated tasks, purposes and end-states. Professor Theo Farrell, articulates a similar problem within the British operations: ‘military strategy was delegated to field commanders, resulting in an inconsistent campaign as successive brigades did their own thing.’

Operation SLIPPER remained the terminology for Australian commitments to Afghanistan, despite the clear defeat of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001. Yet, the war clearly shifted through at least three further phases: support to national elections and reconstruction; holistic provincial counterinsurgency; and national capacity building, under the vague moniker ‘contribution to the International Security Assistance Force.’

Niche Wars encourages the national security practitioner to question how ‘strategic–tactical dissonance’, as described by Major General Rawlins, might be created. Where there is difficulty articulating mission requirements, through the creation of clear operational campaigns, up to policymakers then a failure to ‘convey the strategic intent … down to the

9 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, p 44.
10 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, p 303.
13 Blaxland, Fielding and Gellerfy, Niche Wars, chapter 6.
tactical level’ is the inevitable result.\textsuperscript{14} We are thus reminded of Colin Gray’s ‘strategy bridge’ between policy and tactical action, a metaphor seemingly central to our lessons from niche contributions to these US-led campaigns.\textsuperscript{15}

In terms of the book’s production, it is disappointing that the imagery used throughout bore little resemblance to the narrative at hand. The editors have thus lost an opportunity to enhance the reader’s understanding and highlight some of the nuances within the issues each contributor was presenting. Subconsciously, perhaps, incoherent imagery points towards an uncomfortable question for our national security community. Is it possible the strategic objective sought by Australian policymakers was the appearance of Australian Defence Force personnel in our niche wars: imagery that demonstrated an Australia contribution to our alliance frameworks and a vague commitment to a ‘rules-based global order’? If so, the tactical successes were somewhat irrelevant. Such a perception, as uncomfortable as it may be, might have undermined the crafting of effective military strategy.

The rare and valuable lessons on the challenges of whole-of-government coordination, translating tactical actions for strategic effect and codifying lessons learned that are provided by \textit{Niche Wars} make it an important reference for the national security and policy professional. Indeed, that such lessons span the machinery of government – from policy to policing to military actions – only amplifies this conclusion. \textit{Niche Wars} serves also to record the insights of political, public service and military authors who have or will soon retire from service. As Australian operations in the Middle East come to an end, it is especially timely to have a book that captures the hard-won leadership lessons learnt by many who were junior military leaders during this period and went on to become Commanding Officers and Sergeant-Majors. \textit{Niche Wars} is an important contribution to Australian strategic studies that will help prevent the loss of such knowledge and ensures it can be passed on to future generations.

\textsuperscript{14} This assertion stands in stark contrast to the clear phasing associated with Australia’s ultimately effective engagement in Timor Leste through shifting aims, objectives and command relationships. Australia’s strategic objectives were pursued through discrete operations progressing from Operation FABER (19 June to 15 September 1999), Operation SPTIFIRE (6 to 19 September 1999), Operation STABILISE (16 September 1999 to 23 February 2000), Operation TANAGER (20 February 2000 to 19 May 2002), Operation CITADEL (May 2002 to May 2004), Operation SPIRE (20 May 2004 to 20 May 2005), Operation CHIRON (20 May 2005 to 11 May 2006) to Operation ASTUTE (2006 to 2013). Another campaigning comparison (albeit imperfect) is the UK approach over a similar timeframe to that of Operation SLIPPER, involving Operation VERITAS (October 2001 to 31 July 2002) – the overthrow of the Taliban regime; Operation FINGAL (1 January 2002 to 19 March 2002) – contribution to the ISAF support of the Afghan Interim Authority with the provision of security and stability in Kabul; Operation JACANA (16 April to 9 July 2002) – clearance operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants; and Operation HERRICK (2002 to 2014) – British contribution to ISAF and the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).