Defence White Paper 2015

Herewith a short submission to the deliberations for the Defence White Paper 2015. I have no objections to the publication of this submission if required.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the first deployment of Australian Forces to Iraq in 2003 to the present deployment in 2014 there has been an almost exclusive commitment of Special Force units for meaningful ground combat activity to the exclusion of the fighting elements of wider army, particularly the infantry battalions. This situation has apparently resulted from a political view that employment of Special Forces as opposed to conventional units will result in a lower casualty rate, a contention not necessarily borne out in practice. The policy has resulted in an over commitment of Special Force units and an under-utilization of the other fighting elements of the army depriving them of operational experience that was readily available over lengthy deployments. The net result is not beneficial to either element. Such a policy will not be possible in more substantial conflict and should not continue for either small or large scale commitments in future.
USE OF AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL FORCES IN RECENT OPERATIONS

The two most recent Australian interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen a substantial emphasis on the use of Special Forces i.e. Special Air Service (SAS) and Commando Regiment units in cases where the use of conventional Army units such as infantry battalions would have provided equal capability and have relieved Special Force units from the burden of continuous rotation. This brief paper is in no way a criticism of Australian Special Force units which are very well trained, of the highest quality and operationally effective, but an attempt to redress the balance between these units and the rest of the fighting Army which has been allowed to languish with consequent adverse effects on operational experience, capability and morale.

While the traditional role of commando units, broadly small scale and specialist raids, has not changed, the role of SAS traditionally long range patrolling and reconnaissance has changed dramatically to include aggressive infantry activity, to the degree that the traditional role appears to have been superceded in practice. The reasons for the change of emphasis away from conventional units to the almost inevitable deployment of Special Forces for any real operational activity appears to stem from a variety of factors. The most important is the small scale of Australian interventions, where we have aimed to contribute sufficient resources to provide a credible contribution, while at the same time holding back from the type of all arms involvement of our major allies the United States (US), Britain and for the first time in many years Canada. It is not suggested that our contributions could have been on the same scale as those of our allies, but even a comparatively small contribution would not have precluded involvement of the wider army. It appears however that the type of contribution provided stems from a political belief that it ensures a minimum casualty rate a contention not necessarily borne out in practice in Afghanistan. This belief has perhaps become ingrained. This strategy will not be possible in more substantial conflict where we will be forced to provide a balanced force of all arms or risk not providing an appropriate contribution. At the same time it has had the adverse effect of over commitment of Special Forces and an under-utilization of the fighting arms of the army particularly infantry battalions.

Recent operations are a case in point where Special Forces including a reserve commando unit were used in small scale aggressive activity against the Taliban, while at the same time well trained infantry battalions were used merely to monitor Afghan Army units and then not much more than half a battalion at a time. Other fighting elements including artillery and armoured units were not deployed at all, the one exception being a troop of artillerymen attached to a British unit. Even if deployment of these units was not contemplated, infantry battalions could have been used to far better advantage with the consequent reduction in over use of Special Forces.

The most recent commitment in Iraq provides a similar but even more irrational example of the same mind set, where Special Forces have been deployed to monitor Iraqi units, a task undertaken in Afghanistan by infantry units and quite obviously well within their capabilities. One adverse result of this policy has be to de-emphasise the importance of the major fighting elements of the army, namely its infantry battalions and to prevent them gaining the valuable operational experience that could have been available to them over the long Afghanistan commitment. There is no doubt that there have been effects on morale as a result.
One other aspect that should be borne in mind is that Special Forces draw most of their manpower from the infantry battalions. Special Forces require a well-trained recruiting pool and any reduction in the standards of the battalions will have consequential effects on them. Emphasis on Special Forces has been reflected in the media where many journalists would have great difficulty identifying any other army units a deficiency no doubt reflected in the community in general.

Since the deployment to Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent deployments in Afghanistan culminating in the most recent exercise in Iraq there has been an over emphasis on Special Forces for significant operational activity at the expense of the fighting arms of the army, particularly the infantry battalions. This has had adverse effects on both elements and appears to have resulted from political rather than operational considerations. For the sake of the fighting capability of the army this over emphasis should cease.