

# The future of war debate in Australia. Why has there not been one? Has the need for one now arrived? <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Over the past several years, members of the US military and defence communities have participated in a robust, vibrant, sometimes painful but ultimately healthy debate over the changing character of war and the organisation, equipment and doctrine that the US Army requires to meet the challenges of future conflict. This has not been the first time that the US has shaped the future of its military in public view. The debates on the 'revolution in military affairs' in the 1990s and the implementation of rotary wing aviation in the 1950s provide other ready examples.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as the US Army wrestles diligently with fundamental questions about how it should prepare to fight wars of the future, the primary response to these same questions from within the Australian Army has been one of silence.

The lack of debate within the Australian Army is odd and worrying. After all, self-examination is one of the hallmarks of military professionalism and reflection is a key enabler when interpreting recent operations and predicting future

requirements. The Australian Army is not without recent operational experience to draw from as a starting point for such a debate. The opposite is true; the last decade has been among the force's busiest. The Australian Army has been a witness—if not accessory—to the US triumphs and tragedies in Iraq and Afghanistan, while operations in Timor Leste and elsewhere in the region add a further layer of experience. As is the case for their US counterparts, there is no doubt that members of the Australian Army have the operational experience needed to underpin a reflection on the art of war and to think on its future course.<sup>3</sup>

This article will explore the reasons for the lack of debate within the Australian Army on the future character of war. In doing so it will summarise the scope of the US debate to contrast it with the absence of a robust and open deliberation of this subject within this country. It will speculate on what cultural, bureaucratic and operational factors inhibit debate by the members of the Australian Army and suggest how these impediments might be overcome. Lastly, this article will highlight why such a debate is urgently needed by the Australian Army as its members adjust to a post-Afghanistan role, while facing emerging challenges to the nation's strategic and operational environments.

While the article's focus is on the Army, its conclusions could apply equally to the RAN and RAAF, and to the ADF as a whole. It appears that the entire Australian Defence organisation suffers from a deep-seated fear of allowing its members to engage in debate on the critical issues that affect the ADF's future and the nation's security. This is a policy which in the end is foolhardy, counterproductive and fiscally wasteful—and which should be changed. It is the opposite of what needs to be done; it was by openly encouraging debate, for example, that after its defeat in the First World War the German Army correctly identified and responded to the

changing character of war.<sup>4</sup> It is hoped that this article will spur the Australian Defence organisation to accept the necessity for debate in the US style and, in doing so, commit itself to facilitating the free and open sharing of ideas and opinions by its members.

## The US future of war debate

The most recent future of war debate in the US was held in public view, beyond the Pentagon's control, and was representative of the best traditions of that nation's belief in free speech and the exchange of ideas. It was conducted unchecked by senior officers and took place in widely available publications, including the online *Small Wars Journal*, the *Armed Forces Journal*, and the National Defense University's *Joint Forces Quarterly*, as well as in academic journals and books, and in other outlets such as online forums. In 2010, the US Army's Strategic Studies Institute held a public conference on the theme of 'war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Its director described the issue as the most pressing question facing the international defence community.<sup>5</sup> The debate has involved serving and retired officers, usually with recent operational experience, as well as academics, security thinkers and defence bureaucrats. No-one has been afraid to challenge existing orthodoxies. Of additional significance has been that the debate has not been top-down driven. Rather, many of its participants have been mid-career officers whose positions of institutional influence still lay in their future.<sup>6</sup>

The debate has coalesced around the personalities of two individuals, Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl (Retd) and Colonel Gian P. Gentile. Both are smart, experienced combat veterans who have found themselves on the opposite sides of the issue. They are well educated and have PhDs from important universities. Nagl's is from Oxford and his thesis was published as *Learning to eat soup with a knife: counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*.<sup>7</sup> He was part of the writing team for the US Army/US Marine Corps' counterinsurgency manual (FM3-24), for which he wrote the foreword.<sup>8</sup> Gentile's PhD is from Stanford

University and he too has had his thesis published.<sup>9</sup> The two have also held professorships at the US Military Academy.

Nagl and Gentile have squared off in the pages of *Joint Forces Quarterly* on more than one occasion and have been supported by allies or challenged by opponents elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> For example, *Small Wars Journal* hosted a 'point-counterpoint' discussion in response to Nagl and Gentile having published articles of opposing view in *Joint Forces Quarterly*.<sup>11</sup> This spawned a lengthy and frank debate on the *Small Wars Journal* website.<sup>12</sup> At its height, neither side showed any sign of shrinking away from the argument and at times hard feelings must have resulted, even if temporary. As one commentator noted, both men deserved great credit for their role in helping to shape the future of the US military.<sup>13</sup>

In brief, Nagl advocated that the future character of war would be asymmetric, with modern Western military organisations having to separate insurgents from the population, in complex terrain, in full view of the international media. He foresaw the future role of the US Army to be one of stabilisation and state building, with a strong element of social engineering. Implicit in Nagl's argument was a commitment to a vast military enterprise lasting decades, during which the US would remake targeted countries into a form in which the international forces of destabilisation would find little refuge.

Gentile, by contrast, feared that the US Army was at risk of becoming a constabulary force that knew how to build nations in the US image but possessed little capacity for conventional warfighting. Gentile was also unconvinced of Nagl's ability to forecast the future, and held serious concerns over force specialisation in a world in which there was a not insignificant risk of conflict resuming on the Korean Peninsula, the use of force to settle the 'Taiwan problem' or a clash occurring between the US and Iran. Emerging national security risks associated with the rise of China was another eventuality for which a counterinsurgency-focused force would have little utility. Gentile insisted that a single concept army would not prove to be the best

choice for the future.<sup>14</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich divided those participating in the debate into two camps: 'crusaders' (Nagl) and 'conservatives' (Gentile).<sup>15</sup> 'Crusaders' seek to use the US defence force to remake the world, whereas 'conservatives' see a more limited role for its military power.

The intensity of the US debate on a counterinsurgency versus conventional future of war has begun to ebb, although a compelling case has been made for it to continue.<sup>16</sup> At times, Nagl's 'crusader' camp seemed to be ahead on points but, more recently, it has appeared that the 'conservatives' have come to the fore. The move by General David Petraeus, a counterinsurgency guru, to the Central intelligence Agency may be suggestive of an institutional decision for a more conventional war future. Reinforcing this outcome would be the US Government's pledge to refocus its security primacy on the Asia-Pacific and to meet the challenge of a rising China.

Perhaps a 'conservative' victory would always have been the debate's outcome. As Colin Gray has pointed out, a long-term shift in the US Army's capabilities from regular to irregular war would have required the organisation to overcome deep cultural preferences.<sup>17</sup> Such a fundamental change may not have been possible, at least not without concerted pressure from both the defence and political hierarchies.

That the debate did not result in significant change—or at least it appears not to have so far—in the US Army's posture is immaterial to this discussion. It is the organisation's willingness to engage in honest self-reflection that is important. The Nagl-Gentile debate enabled the organisation to make sense of a decade of war and to reflect on which aspects of that experience were relevant for the future and which were not. The debate also encouraged the organisation to examine its experiences from the perspective of future requirements and to address issues of core values. War is not a static enterprise. It is only by bringing its study into the open that a military organisation can begin to understand its changing character.

## Why has there not been a future character of war debate in Australia?

There may be a temptation to dismiss the lack of a future character of war debate in Australia as a consequence of the Army's small size, especially relative to that of the US Army. It is worth asking if a middle power such as Australia can realistically discern and shape the future character of war on the international stage, especially when a great power struggles with this task. However, size should never be a prohibition on intellectual curiosity. The world is a potentially hostile place for all nations, and a country's relative size does not exempt the members of its defence force from treating their profession with the intellectual seriousness it deserves.

There is a related argument that the Australian Army's small size relative to that of the US Army means that everyone knows everyone, so a formal debate on emerging issues is not needed. This too is not a satisfying excuse. Heated discussions around a barbecue are a good way for thinking officers to blow off steam at the difficulties they face in challenging the force's orthodoxies but have no enduring value if such ideas do not reach a forum in which they can be challenged and scrutinised by others, including outsiders. Organisational inculcation of new ideas will not occur without dissemination throughout the organisation and beyond.<sup>18</sup>

A second tempting explanation for the failure of Australian Army members to challenge the existing orthodoxy is that the US debate was concerned with more than just the future character of war. There is an element of truth in this as the US debate does contain a parochial subtext on the utility of military power in the achievement of national aims. In advocating for or objecting to its transformation into a primarily counterinsurgency force, those debating the US Army's future were also questioning the nature of US grand strategy—the 'hows' and 'whys' of American behaviour on the world stage.<sup>19</sup> Stripped of its military terminology, a strong

element of the Nagl-Gentile debate was actually about the purpose of the US in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the underlying scope of the US-based debate does not lessen the importance of holding an Australian-based one—one that defines a future concept of war within an Australian context. Undoubtedly there will be overlap between the two. But only Australian military professionals and their civilian counterparts can debate the institution's own future and decide how it integrates into the nation's particular strategic situation, as well as the broader sweep of the evolving art of war. Thus debate on the future character of war must occur in Australia. But the question remains: why has it not? There are several reasons for this state of affairs and they can be characterised as cultural, bureaucratic and operational impediments. It is to their explanation that this analysis will now turn.

### *Cultural impediments*

One of the predictors of the richness of any debate is the intellectual capacity of its participants. As noted before, Nagl and Gentile both hold PhDs from prestigious universities. To this list could be added Petraeus, who has a PhD from Princeton University. Officers with such backgrounds have the credibility and training to weather the sometimes brutal thrust and parry of a challenging and robust debate. They also have the knowledge and confidence to comment outside their Service cultures and to engage with thinkers from the broader defence and academic communities.

Yet it is all too easy to be dazzled by such credentials, and it should be recognised that most US officers do not have such high-level degrees, nor need they. Moreover, soldier scholars are not unknown in the Australian Army. One could point to a number of serving and former soldiers who have been awarded a PhD and some of these have gone on to distinguished careers in academia. A number of Australian officers have excelled at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies and the US Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting, while the Army has allowed a couple of senior officers to attend the

Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC. Thus the force does possess a cadre of thinking soldiers.

Such opportunities as these do allow their recipients to think deeply about the profession of arms in a challenging intellectual environment. The point is that the existence of officers in possession of higher degrees is not what enables a debate to take place. An educated, intelligent and curious officer corps is important but such personnel must work within a welcoming cultural framework that creates a conducive environment for the development of challenging ideas and their frank debate. Unfortunately, such an environment does not currently exist in the Department of Defence. Admittedly, this state of affairs is not limited to Army or the ADF. Rather, it is a manifestation of the sense of anti-intellectualism that pervades the broader Australian society.

Australians tend to favour the 'happy larrikin' over the deep thinker. Within the defence realm this takes the form of a preference for 'doers' over 'thinkers' or, as one officer observed, the Army has a cultural fixation on delivering outputs rather than achieving outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Planning is a forte of military organisations but all too often the plan is seen as the end-point. What is really important is the context in which the plan sits and the goals it hopes to achieve. Being a 'thinker' requires a different intellectual skill-set, a breadth of knowledge, the ability to see nuances and shades of grey, and a willingness to challenge. The ADF is by no means unique in this weakness. For example, Huba Wass de Czege has commented that the US Army spends far too little time trying to understand a problem before trying to solve it, usually with unfortunate results.<sup>22</sup>

Periodically, the Army has launched initiatives for the promotion of study but all of these have quickly fallen away, unable to find a fertile patch in the force's culture in which to flourish. For example, towards the end of his tenure as Chief of the General Staff (the Chief of Army in today's parlance) Lieutenant General John Coates established an essay-writing program in military history, the discipline most vital in the education

of a military professional.<sup>23</sup> Within weeks of his retirement, another general made sure the idea met a swift death. For this other general, 'intellectuals' and 'book learning' were terms of contempt.<sup>24</sup>

Intellectualism is an undervalued trait in the Australian Army, despite the presence of a small cadre of serving and retired 'soldier scholars'. It should be pointed out that the very existence of these soldier scholars was a result of their own efforts; they are not the product of institutional want and the Army does not have a program to support high-level research outside of military schools. At best, it is an ad hoc approach, with little institutional support beyond that of happenstance. This was also the case for the two senior officers who attended Johns Hopkins, as mentioned earlier.

Unfortunately, more recent efforts by other officers to secure support for participation in this program have failed; it appears that the Army's interest has proven all too brief. The organisation responsible for shaping the career of intellectually minded officers is the Directorate of Career Management (DoCM). This agency is in an unenviable position. In the absence of institutional direction—and funding—expediency wins out, with priority given to putting the best officers into billets with immediate needs, rather than looking to the long-term benefit of a better-educated individual. DoCM, which would be well-placed to drive an advanced education program, must respond to institutional priorities which continue to favour doers over thinkers and the practical over the conceptual.

The ability to perform a task is certainly an important part of being a soldier. But getting on with the job should not take second place to being able to put the job within the context of, for example, why it is being done, how it will contribute to the goal and what might be the second-order consequences. One approach to accomplishing the Army's mission leads to task-focused work, the other to thinking-focused work. The Australian Army needs to empower the latter so that it is as valued as the former. If the Army is to become an organisation which

facilitates the debating of ideas, it will need to attach greater importance to conceptual thinking and reallocate resources accordingly.<sup>25</sup> It will need to become more than an output-driven organisation.

### *Bureaucratic impediments*

If culture serves as one form of impediment to debate, institutional barriers provide another. The Department of Defence has set in place policies that discourage access to forums in which personnel could participate in or hold debates. In fact, the institutional preference is to have full control of ideas and messages, particularly if they are unorthodox ones. This is accomplished through a number of internal protocols that serve to limit the exchange of ideas. For example, members of the Defence community are required to seek the approval of their chain of command prior to any public comment or the release of any images or information to organisations outside of the Department.<sup>26</sup> Control is appropriate in matters of national security but the Department of Defence's limitations on external contact go much further.

In an era when access to the internet and social media are taken for granted, and as information increasingly resides on the web, the Department of Defence continues to struggle with the idea of unfettered internet access for its members. Web-based applications that cannot be monitored, or where there is the ability to download information or participate in forums, remain prohibited.<sup>27</sup> Strangely enough, Defence even disables links to university databases from within the organisation because of difficulty in monitoring the sites that employees may investigate. Thus, ready access to the repositories of the nation's knowledge is considered too risky by those who determine or enforce the Department's information management protocols.<sup>28</sup>

Officers who have dared to publish memoirs of their operational service have encountered lengthy delays in obtaining Defence approval. Colonel Marcus Fielding, for example, served in a Coalition headquarters in Iraq and later recorded

his experiences in *Red zone Baghdad*.<sup>29</sup> After waiting for nearly 15 months for the Department to make a decision on the book's fate, Fielding was told that Defence would not allow him to publish it while he was a serving officer, a determination that made no reference to any security issues that the work may have contained. Another senior officer, Major General Jim Molan, also experienced considerable delay in obtaining permission to publish his memoir, *Running the War in Iraq*.<sup>30</sup>

It is unlikely that there was malicious intent in the prolonged struggle for approval that these officers experienced from Defence. Rather, it is more likely that the need to consider such approvals comes up so rarely that the Department does not have an established process for clearing publications authored by serving officers. This absence of process is a further indictment of the force's sense of anti-intellectualism but it also raises an additional concern. The knowledge and experience that officers such as Molan and Fielding obtained while on operations should be quickly, widely and openly disseminated throughout the ADF and elsewhere, if the organisation is to learn from its operations. Otherwise, such knowledge—obtained at such cost—will be squandered. In fact, not only should officers be encouraged—and even given time—to write about their experiences but Defence should implement procedures to expedite their publication and debate.

No individual or entity appears exempt from attempts by the Department to control the thoughts of its members. The *Australian Army Journal*, the Army's flagship publication whose mandate is to promote understanding of land warfare, has periodically been forced to fend off attempts by Defence mandarins to impose censorship controls. This is despite a clear statement in every issue that the views expressed are those of the authors alone. Senior personnel are not exempt from the bureaucracy's drive to manage external expression. Past Chiefs of Army have even been asked to submit their public speeches for review, admittedly a requirement that never

lasted for long, but one that the organisation deemed itself entitled to make nonetheless.

Instead of the situation getting better, it appears to be getting worse. Directions emanating from the office of the Minister of Defence have imposed stringent message alignment requirements on all staff, including the senior-most levels. It is hard to pin down exactly what the requirements are but the pervading sense is that comment that goes 'off-message' is to be avoided. The media appears to be aware of the engagement constraints under which defence thinkers labour. For example, journalist Ian McPhedran has stated that Defence now operates under a policy of censorship and its public messages are deliberately 'sugar coated'.<sup>31</sup>

Working in such an environment, it is unlikely that a serving member of the Australian Department of Defence would have the courage to write an article similar in tone to that of the US Army's Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling. In 2007, the *Armed Forces Journal* published his damning evaluation of the US political and military leadership in the lead-up to and during the waging of the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>32</sup> Although he took the US defence organisation to task, the US Department of Defense accepted that Yingling's motivation was not out of a wish to cause embarrassment or institutional harm.

Rather, what drove Yingling was his belief that something had gone seriously wrong in how the US planned and ran the Iraq war, and that these deficiencies needed to be exposed to scrutiny so that they would not happen again. His goal was to help make US national security stronger and more effective. Yingling spoke out from a desire to improve the security of his nation, a driving force that his superiors recognised and accepted. Of course, Yingling has not been alone in delivering his message but the point for the Australian Department of Defence to understand is that an insider can deliver an unpleasant message but one which the organisation can use to create a more effective defence force. Those who are the most knowledgeable of Defence are its insiders; they are also the very people who have the most at stake in making a better ADF. The US defence

organisation may not have liked what Yingling wrote, and there would have been institutional pushback, but no one would have prevented him from speaking out.

In imposing the tight constraints that it does, Defence makes it unnecessarily hard for insiders to engage with external subject matter experts in academia and industry. The risk in limiting debate is that it fosters a narrow and blinkered perspective, while denying Defence members access to some of the country's best minds. In challenging fiscal times, the ability to exploit external expertise could prove a force multiplier and it is one that should not be missed.

Still, it should be admitted that there are good reasons for these controls—the danger of compromising national security or the protection of the integrity of defence systems, for example. However, there is also a suggestion of mistrust, that the senior hierarchy does not expect Defence members to do the right thing or that some personnel might be tempted to go off-message, resulting in the most troubling of eventualities: media inquiry. What the organisation's leaders miss, however, is that officially promulgated concepts can just as easily be strengthened by being tested in an open debate than weakened by criticism. Besides, if debate reveals a concept as flawed it would be better—and cheaper—to discover this sooner rather than having it inevitably revealed at a later date.

Debates are time sensitive and move at a pace that does not easily fit within the timeline demanded by the need to obtain approval from the chain of command. They are fostered best in a climate that encourages the free engagement of ideas, not one that seeks to control, direct or monitor interaction and engagement. The current requirements for external comment support a policy that was not designed to promote curiosity and responsible thinking by the members of the defence community but it is one that would certainly find favour in Beijing.

Department of Defence policy has also hindered the development of Service-sponsored online forums and blogs similar to those that have

proliferated overseas. By comparison, members of the US Army are relatively free to exploit such opportunities. Twitter, too, remains an 'out of hours' activity despite its growing utility in other sectors. Nor does Australia have a publication such as the US-based *Small Wars Journal*. As an online publication, *Small Wars Journal* provides a ready platform for debate and allows a rapid turnaround in the exchange of ideas through its articles, editorials and forums. The *Australian Army Journal* does provide a venue for contributors to air their views. But it is published only three times a year—frequently enough to highlight topics of emerging concern but not to sustain a debate on its own.

The Directorate of Army Research and Analysis (DARA) (formed from the merger of Future Land Warfare-Strategy and the Land Warfare Studies Centre) established an online publication called *Shortcasts* in 2010, which offers short concept pieces. Unfortunately, access remains limited to insiders. DARA also sponsors an online forum called 'FLW2G', which is available beyond the Defence firewall to select participants, a feature which should be encouraged and allowed to spread.

To attract commentators, FLW2G is unattributed, currently a necessity to ease contributor concerns over organisational push-back. Hopefully, one day *Shortcasts* will evolve into an Australian version of *Small Wars Journal*—but to do so it would need to re-establish itself outside of Department of Defence's control. This would be a useful step. But what is really needed to foster intellectual interaction within and beyond the defence community is not more internal outlets but rather unfettered access to the plethora of existing media that flourish outside of the Department's purview.

Despite the significant impediments to external engagement outlined above, such barriers remain a partial explanation for the failure of the Army's intellectually-minded members to debate the changing character of war. Being bureaucratic mandates they could all quite easily be removed, simply by the organisation's leaders deciding to do so. After all, a number of senior officers have

found roles as defence commentators in retirement. Perhaps if these officers had begun to speak out while still members of the Army it would have demonstrated that officers can be trusted to engage with an external audience in an appropriate manner. The difficulties inherent in changing Defence's attitude towards external engagement should not be minimised but what has been done to create impediments can be undone to remove them. Hopefully, such a shift in policy will be forthcoming.

### *Operational impediments*

There is one further rationale that helps to explain the absence of an Australian-based debate on the future character of war. All organisations contain preferences—or ways of war—that permeate all aspects of their operations. For example, the US Army prefers to fight conventional state-based opponents against whom they can bring to bear overwhelming firepower; it likes to fight against a force that looks like itself. A critical reason why the Australian Army has not held a debate on the future character of war is internal to the organisation, not a function of external factors. More specifically, the force's leadership, and its intellectually-minded members who would take the lead in such a debate, do not—at least as yet—see sufficient value to the organisation in conducting it; the Australian way of war does not require it. This is not a result of a lack of capacity or facilitation for debate, although these are factors; rather it is a product of the Army's vision of itself.

Since its origins in 1901, the nation's ultimate security has rested on the guarantee of a great power ally. At first this was the UK, while for the past 60 years it has been the US. Throughout its history, the Australian Army has never needed, nor realistically had the ability, to wage war on its own. Instead, it has always fought in a coalition, invariably as a junior partner. As a consequence, the Army's focus has tended to be on the lower end of the art of war, primarily the tactical, at which the force has a well-deserved reputation for excellence. By contrast, its submission to the requirements of the coalition senior partner has

meant that the Australian Army has had little opportunity, or necessity, to shape or influence the art of war at the operational or strategic level. This has not been an irresponsible defence policy. Instead, it has been a clever one that has allowed the nation to leverage a much greater defence capability than it would have been able to do on its own or, at least, not without a massively increased defence budget.

In fulfilling the role of a junior coalition partner, the Army has ceded a range of responsibilities. This has been a necessity as the force has never possessed the full range of capabilities and manpower needed to operate as an independent force. In recent years, this trend has become even more marked and it is now unlikely that the Army (or the ADF) could wage war on its own against a credible opponent, even if the government so desired.<sup>33</sup> Today, it has become common to describe the Army as a 'niche provider'. This has not necessarily been a negative development, rather it has brought considerable benefits to the Army while on operations, allowing Australia to maximise the strategic effect of its relatively modest manpower contribution to a coalition operation, such as was the case in the war in Iraq. However, one of the areas of military professionalism that is compromised by being a niche player is the necessity to interpret the changing character of war.

Thus, if the Australian Army wants to participate in or lead a debate on the emerging trends in the art of war, it will first have to change its perception of itself. Out of necessity, it may need to remain a niche provider of a limited range of capabilities but it will also have to endeavour to think more broadly beyond the range of just tactics.

This will require the force to excel on two levels. It must continue to strive for excellence in the tactical battlespace, as this will remain the force's primary focus for as long as it remains a junior coalition partner. Moreover, the organisation will also have to expand its intellectual remit to include the higher levels of the art of war. It will have to become comfortable with the idea of thinking broadly, even if it only acts narrowly. This

needs to happen because changes in the art of war that are now taking place and shifts in the strategic balance that are now emerging in the Indo-Pacific region will demand an army that can master the entire range of the art of war, even as it remains a small force. It is to why the Australian Army must develop the skills to engage in a future of war debate to which this article will now turn.

## Why a 'future of war' debate is needed

The Army needs a debate on the future character of war so that it is able to prepare itself for the changes in the operational and strategic environment that are now becoming apparent. These are the requirements to define an army for the post-Afghanistan era, including adapting the force to a maritime strategy; reinterpreting the strategic environment because of the rise of China; and understanding the potential of climate change to act as a threat to national security. This will also have to happen in a period that will be dominated by a need for austerity, itself a reason for considered introspection as the Army strives to balance capability and government requirements within a constrained budget.

The Australian Government has already announced that it will end its commitment to Afghanistan, while the Army's lengthy deployments to Timor Leste and the Solomon Islands are also in their terminal phases.<sup>34</sup> After more than a decade of having to manage a high tempo of operations, the Army may be able to enjoy a period of rest, reconstitution and, perhaps most importantly, reflection. Lieutenant General David Morrison, the Chief of Army, has highlighted this opportunity in his recent speeches. He makes the point that the nation needs an Army that is focused on the future, not the past. Morrison rightly believes that the Army became complacent after the end of the Vietnam War and became too comfortable resting on its accomplishments, instead of discerning the lessons that were of importance for the next campaign.<sup>35</sup>

The Army's reshaping in the post-Afghanistan era is already underway. 'Plan Beersheba' will address problems in the Army's force-generation cycle that placed the organisation under considerable strain during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Morrison has also stated that he believes that future wars in which Australia may be involved are most likely to be of a hybrid character. The widespread availability of advanced technology weapons has meant that highly lethal and effective ordnance is now within the reach of hostile irregular forces. One result of this trend is that the distinction between regular and irregular forces has blurred and has rendered the difference between conventional and guerrilla war almost meaningless.<sup>36</sup> Israel's war with Hezbollah in South Lebanon demonstrates just how tough and dangerous a fight with a contemporary non-state actor can be.<sup>37</sup>

It is hard to fault Morrison's conclusion—and he is not alone in this judgment. Numerous commentators have dispatched state-on-state war to 'history's dustbin', although it must be recognised that the possibility remains; the ongoing potential for conflict on the Korean Peninsula, for example.<sup>38</sup> However, endorsing 'hybrid' as the probable form of war is not the end-point. Hybrid war comes in many forms, as do potential opponents in Australia's primary operational environment.

Moreover, the Australian Army will have to counter a possible hybrid threat within the limits of its means; great power assistance may not be available because such a conflict will not represent an existential danger to Australia. Thus, the Army must consider what it means by hybrid and how it will respond. Many of the questions that this requirement will generate can rightly be addressed through the concept and doctrine development processes. However, why limit the force's access to expertise? Why not manage the security issue but still open the process of examination more widely and allow members of the Army to engage with each other in a way that will also allow the organisation to draw upon external thinkers?

The future of war debate in Australia. Why has there not been one? Has the need for one now arrived?

The rise of China represents another major security challenge for Australia, as well as the other countries of the Asia-Pacific basin.<sup>39</sup> It is not possible to predict the end-state of China's rise or even if it will continue unabated.<sup>40</sup> But it is clear that the current strategic balance in the Western Pacific is under tension—a tension that will grow with China's expanding economy and modernising military, and as it gains the capability to challenge US dominance.<sup>41</sup>

Recently, China has demonstrated a willingness to employ its growing clout to gain its own way. For example, Chinese companies spontaneously decided to cease the export of rare earth elements to Japan after a diplomatic row occurred when a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese vessel in disputed waters. Similarly, China has reiterated its claim to islands in the South China Sea. It has also sought to extend its influence into regions further afield. Recently, China defined itself as a 'near-Arctic state' with the intent of gaining permanent observer status on the Arctic Council. Australia has not been exempt from such assertive behaviour. During Foreign Minister Bob Carr's first official visit to China, his counterpart suggested that Australia could not indefinitely juggle its relationship with China and the US. The implication was that Australia would have to pick a side.<sup>42</sup>

It is by no means certain that conflict will be the necessary result of China's rise, despite the expectations of some. Certainly, comments in the US that attempt to paint China as a new 'Cold War' opponent are unwise and premature, unless of course one has a vested interest in the industrial-military complex.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, calls within Australia for the ADF to gain the ability to "rip an arm off" any major Asian power' are as unhelpful as they are fanciful.<sup>44</sup> At this point in the strategic transition in the Pacific, more restrained language is what is required, paired with cautious observation and quiet planning.

Australia is not presently under any threat from China—and how its rise will shape the strategic environment of the Asia Pacific is not fully known. This is precisely why the Australian Army needs to

begin a debate on the subject and why it should do so now, rather than waiting. The Army needs to ponder what the Asian Century means for itself and the country. In the US, the debate has already begun and the 'air-sea battle' concept is receiving considerable examination as the replacement for the 'air-land battle' concept.<sup>45</sup>

Yet it would be a serious mistake for the Australian Army to again sit on the sidelines, as it did during the Nagl-Gentile debate, and wait for the US to reach a conclusion. While the US is Australia's great power protector it does not mean that the interests of the two countries are identical, particularly when China is our largest trading partner and the source of much of the nation's wealth. Australia is in the unenviable position of having to negotiate a course between its protector and its banker, and in the process try to balance its national and economic security. Surely, this requires a specifically Australian debate, one in which the Army has an important part to play.

Commentators all too often consider climate change from the perspective of an environmental or natural disaster or human security issue. This is a far too limited perspective, as it also has serious implications for national security. There is little doubt that climate events have been a factor in the rise and fall of civilisations, destroying some polities while offering others the opportunity for expansion.<sup>46</sup> The effects of climate change are not uniform, as the evidence of the past suggests. Instead, it produces both winners and losers.<sup>47</sup> For Australian military professionals, climate change may be of even greater concern because some analysts believe that our primary operating environment will be among the worst affected.<sup>48</sup>

Researchers generally do not view climate change as a direct cause of war.<sup>49</sup> Rather, they see it as creating a situation in which societies will use war as a means to secure their requirements in order to survive. The primary threat to societies is that climate change reduces the carrying capacity of a country's resource base below the requirements of its population. In an era of globalisation, a country that is unable to meet its people's minimum requirements can enter the global

market and obtain what it needs there. However, with the advent of global climate change, countries may prove unwilling to sell resources at any price, as did Russia when it closed its borders to grain exports due to a poor harvest in 2010.<sup>50</sup> Under globalisation, trade practices have worked well as a pressure valve because spare capacity exists in the system. If spare capacity was to be no longer available, it is likely that autarkical national tendencies will re-emerge.

Under the influence of climate change, countries whose resource bases are unable to meet their citizens' needs will face stark choices. Food availability provides a useful example. If people are no longer able to obtain food either locally or from the global market, they have limited options. Hopefully, their country has enough reserves to carry through to the next harvest, assuming it is a good one. However, as a country's stockpile of food is exhausted, the people will have to choose between starving in place and seeking the resources they need elsewhere. War will be the likely outcome. It may be comforting to continue to think of climate change in environmental terms but, for all states, there is a 'threshold below which survival interests can be asserted only by force'.<sup>51</sup>

For the Australian Army, therefore, climate change will represent a major future call on its resources. As the strain of climate change takes hold and the potential for states to collapse increases, the Australian Government will call on the Army to stabilise or deter. How the Army accomplishes this needs to be examined, preferably through open debate including free engagement with external experts.

## Conclusion

Australia and its Army are at a turning point. The winding-up of the war in Afghanistan may represent the end of a commitment but it is the developing changes in the nation's strategic environment that are the real game changers for the future. Over the course of its history, the nation has participated in wars both near and far. Most recently, the centres of world conflict have

been at a distance, principally in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. This is now shifting and the focal point of international tension is returning to Australia's part of the world.

In the past, the Army has been able to concentrate its study of war at the tactical level. No-one disputes that this has paid dividends in the high regard the force is held by coalition partners. However, as risks emerge in Australia's primary operational environment, it will be advantageous for the Army to extend its intellectual curiosity to include the full extent of the art of war. To achieve the full benefit of such inquiry, the force's thinkers will need ready access to external forums and experts—and the organisation will have to subject its ideas and concepts to robust and possibly painful examination. The Army and the wider Department of Defence need to embrace a culture of openness that has heretofore not been available to the organisation's members. The preference for 'making do' will need to be replaced by one that values thinking before acting. The force will need to become a true learning organisation in which 'intellectual' is no longer a term of derision.

There are risks and perhaps even embarrassments in such a course of action. But as the free-spirited willingness to debate in the US has shown, such concerns are greatly outweighed by the benefits. The time has come for those who lead the Department of Defence, the ADF and the Army to absorb a lesson from Australia's great power protector—that the free exchange of ideas is a force multiplier whose value, though hard to quantify, will strengthen the effectiveness of the entire organisation.

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## Notes

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- 12 For the discussion thread, see <<http://council.smallwarsjournal.com/showthread.php?t=6273>> accessed 9 February 2011.
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- 15 See Bacevich, 'The Petraeus doctrine'.
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- <sup>24</sup> Email in author's possession.
- <sup>25</sup> On this point, see Bryant, 'Are we a thinking army?', p. 196.
- <sup>26</sup> The applicable Defence Instruction is DI(G) ADMIN 08-1, 'Public comment and dissemination of official information by Defence personnel'.
- <sup>27</sup> Access to information technologies by members of the Defence community is covered by DI(G) CIS 6-1-001, 'Appropriate and inappropriate use of information and communications technology resources'.
- <sup>28</sup> Email in author's possession, 2 May 2012.
- <sup>29</sup> See Marcus Fielding, *Red zone Baghdad: my war in Iraq*, Big Sky Publishing: Newport, 2011.
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- <sup>32</sup> See Paul Yingling, 'A failure in generalship', *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007, available at <<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>> accessed 1 June 2012.
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- <sup>36</sup> Morrison, 'Speech to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute'. See also David Morrison, 'Speech to the Sydney Institute', 28 February 2012.
- <sup>37</sup> For the lessons of this war, see Matt M. Matthews, *We were unprepared: the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war*, US Army Combined Arms Center: Fort Leavenworth, 2008.
- <sup>38</sup> Steven Metz and Raymond A. Millen, *Future war/future battlespace: the strategic role of American land power*, Strategic Studies Institute: Carlisle, 2003, p. 7. See also Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world*, Vintage Books: New York, 2008. For an opposing view, see Colin S. Gray, *Another bloody century: future war*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 2005.
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- <sup>44</sup> Ross Babbage, 'Learning to walk amongst giants: the new Defence White Paper', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Autumn 2008, p. 18.
- <sup>45</sup> See Jan Van Tol, *AirSea Battle: a point of departure operational concept*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment: Washington DC, 2010. For one questioning analysis, see Macgregor and Kim, 'Air-Sea Battle'.
- <sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Mazo, *Climate conflict: how global warming threatens security and what to do about it*, IISS/Routledge: London, 2010, p. 12. See also Jared Diamond, *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive*, Allen Lane: Melbourne, 2005.
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- <sup>49</sup> A brief overview of the literature on climate change and the onset of war would include: *National security and the threat of climate change*, The CNA Corporation: Alexandria, 2007; 'Forecast is grim for global security: climate change presenting stability problems and creating new maritime tasks', *Naval Forces*, 1/2008, pp. 40-44; Joshua W. Busby, *Climate change and national security: an agenda for action*, Council on Foreign Relations: New York, 2007; James R. Lee, *Climate change and armed conflict: hot and cold wars*, Routledge: London, 2009; and Brian Fagan, *The great warming: climate change and the rise and fall of civilizations*, Bloomsbury Press: New York, 2008.
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