

The Defence of Australia and the Limits of Land Power

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Australian defence policy has generally favoured expeditionary campaigns over the more independent 'defence of Australia' approach, even though those campaigns almost invariably have failed at one or more levels. Currently the expeditionary model is again being strongly promoted by proponents of land power, primarily through its associated concepts of 'war amongst the people' and the 'three-block' war. Those concepts are, however, based on assumed capabilities that armies do not have and cannot acquire; indeed, somewhat ironically, they expose the innate limits of land power. Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to circumvent those limits by adopting a primarily defensive military strategy which both avoids the flawed logic of expeditionary campaigns and offers a credible method for *controlling* the immediate environment and defending the fundamentals of our national well-being.¹

From the time of federation in 1901, the central question for the defence of Australia has always been: should national forces be sent abroad to fight as part of a coalition, almost invariably under the leadership of a 'great and powerful friend' as a means of earning security credits with that friend; or should they instead concentrate on the largely self-reliant task of the direct defence of the Australian continent? In the event, expeditionary campaigns based on the deployment of armies has been the preferred choice, even though, with the notable exception of World War II, the unintended consequences of that policy have generally diminished rather than enhanced national security.²

As Western strategists struggle to develop a theory for defeating today's elusive, asymmetric enemies, the debate over forward defence versus the defence of Australia remains as contentious as ever.³ Recently one influential school of strategic thought has created something of a self-serving dynamic between expeditionary campaigns and the associated notions of 'war amongst the people' and the so-called 'three-block war'.⁴ That school

¹ An earlier, longer version of this article was published as a working paper by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University.

² For commentary on the (often severe) unexpected consequences of warfare generally, and especially wars of invasion, see Kenneth J. Hagan and Ian J. Bickerton, *Unintended Consequences: The United States at War*, London, Reaktion Books, 2007.

³ See for example Greg Sheridan, 'Shadow Boxing', *The Australian Literary Review*, 2 May 2007, pp. 16-17; and Hugh White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, Sydney, Lowy Institute, 2007.

⁴ From what is an extremely large choice, see the following selection: Robert O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century', a paper prepared for the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre 40th Anniversary Seminar Series, Australian National University, Canberra, 15 August 2006; Michael Evans, 'The Tyranny of Dissonance', *Land Warfare Studies Centre Study*

has promoted its cause through the circular argument that, in modern warfare, war amongst the people and the three-block war are the keys to success, only boots on the ground can execute those concepts, boots on the ground implies the occupation of territory, which implies expeditionary campaigns, which are based on war amongst the people, and so on.

But as most post-World War II military campaigns have revealed, one man's 'expedition' is another man's 'invasion'. Thus, we should not be surprised that Western armies of occupation have proven entirely incapable of fighting amongst the people in Indochina, Iraq, the Middle East and Central Asia. Australia's scorecard from the recent decades of the expeditionary strategy, for example, reads as follows: one disaster (Vietnam), one fiasco (Iraq), one disaster-in-waiting (Afghanistan), and a few blunders (East Timor, the Solomons). No elaboration should be necessary on the characterisations of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, but brief commentary on Afghanistan and Timor may be instructive.

The war against the Taliban and al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan is one of culture, not of arms. Thus, the area in which Australian forces have been active, the southern province of Uruzgan, has been a hotbed of recruitment for new Taliban foot-soldiers since the Western invasion in 2001. Elsewhere the occupying forces have had little influence over law and order; for example, Afghanistan produced a record opium crop in 2006 and is on track to reach a new record in 2007.⁵ Furthermore, the regular deaths of Afghani civilians as 'collateral damage' from the invaders' air and ground fire constantly undermine popular support.⁶

Pakistani officials have a unique and intimate knowledge of Afghanistan, of al-Qa'ida, and of the Taliban; indeed, Pakistan's directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence has long been a sponsor of the Taliban. Those officials are derisive of the West's efforts to win the local hearts and minds, dismissing as 'mission impossible' the expeditionary force's clumsy efforts to conduct war amongst the people.⁷

As far as East Timor is concerned, Australian commentators often ignore the fact that the United Nations-sanctioned intervention in 1999 came at the request of the Indonesian government. Indeed, the single most important factor in the campaign's early success was the Indonesian decision not to

Paper, no. 306, February 2005; Lt Gen Peter Leahy, 'The Medium-Weight Force: Lessons Learned and Future Contributions to Coalition Operations', *Australian Army Journal*, vol. III, no. 2 (2005); Australia Defence Association, 'Well off the ball and far from the mark', *Defence Brief*, no. 126, March 2007; and Sheridan, 'Shadow Boxing'.

⁵ Nick Grono, 'How to beat the Taliban', *The Australian*, 9 April 2007, p. 8.

⁶ 'Bombs blasting Afghan hearts, minds', *The Australian*, 14 May 2007, p. 11.

⁷ Riad Kahwaji, 'Local Realities Clash with U.S. Policy in Tribal Belt', *DefenseNews*, 23 April 2007, pp. 1, 8.

oppose the Australian-led landing. In other words, Australia's military operations were in effect underwritten by Indonesia's cooperation. None of that is to diminish the Australian Defence Force's performance, which was exemplary. But the subsequent show of triumphalism from much of the Australian media and general public suggests that the nature of the operation was misrepresented and misunderstood. Nor is it yet clear that the intervention will ultimately succeed, with the possibility remaining that Australia will have created a failed state in its backyard where none existed before.⁸

Each one of those expeditionary campaigns starkly exposed the innate limits of land power. Almost by definition, an army of occupation is incapable of conducting war amongst the people; while the unavoidable limits on personnel imposed by recruiting standards and resignation rates make the notion of the three-block war not merely unrealistic but unachievable. The fact is that expeditionary campaigns are predicated on capabilities that modern armies do not have, and cannot acquire.

War Amongst The People

Best examined in General Rupert Smith's book *The Utility of Force*, war amongst the people is described as 'a new paradigm' in which political and military developments are ineluctably intertwined, to the extent that people in their homes, in their towns, in their countryside—indeed, anywhere—"are [now] the battlefield".⁹ The concept has been brought into sharp focus by the high incidence of urban warfare over the past twenty years in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia, where a diverse range of militarily primitive militias, nationalists, religious zealots, professional terrorists and the like have exploited the complex environment of cities to become a vexing, sometimes seemingly intractable, problem for their technologically superior Western opponents.

War amongst the people is not, however, an entirely new phenomenon. Urban and rural masses have always been part of the fabric of war, from the time of the sieges recorded by Thucydides 2500 years ago to the suicide bombers of today's mega-cities.¹⁰ And it was as true for Thucydides as it is today that the context of warfare shaped by 'the people' has often been decisive, especially when one protagonist has been perceived as indigenous and the other as foreign. What is relatively new is the people's ability to decide the outcome of military conflict, not through the force of arms but in the court of world opinion. Winning hearts and minds is no longer a hollow

⁸ See Cavan Hogue, 'No escaping the burden of good intentions: The 'liberation' of East Timor is coming back to haunt us', in *The Australian*, March 12, 2007, p. 8; and Nicholas Stuart, 'Botched battle brings home mission's failings', in *The Canberra Times*, 6 March 2007.

⁹ General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, London, Allen Lane, 2005, esp. pp. xiii-xiv, 3-4, 327-31.

¹⁰ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975.

slogan from the American war in Vietnam but an essential component of any campaign plan.

The claim is regularly made that boots on the ground are the answer to defeating insurgents and guerrillas.¹¹ So frequently has this mantra been chanted that for many defence commentators it has become a self-evident truth, to the extent that the full scope of its implications has not been adequately questioned. The fact is, though, that there is no self-evident truth here. On the contrary, over the past half-century, advanced armies have been singularly unsuccessful at fighting amongst the people.

For example, French expeditionary forces were manifestly incapable of winning local hearts and minds during France's invasion and re-occupation of Indochina, which ended with their monumental defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954.¹² Nor could more than half-a-million pairs of boots on the ground win the war in Vietnam for the United States between 1962 and 1975, during a campaign which was defined primarily by the Americans' staggering ignorance of the Vietnamese people's society, culture and history.¹³

The contrast with the communist insurgency in Malaya is instructive. Between 1948 and 1960 British Commonwealth forces fought an ultimately successful campaign against communist terrorists in the so-called Malayan Emergency.¹⁴ The fundamental difference was that, unlike the situation in Indochina, the British never really had to fight a war amongst the people. To start with, the insurgency was largely confined to members of Malaya's minority Chinese community, and the enemy force rarely exceeded 5000.¹⁵ And in a ploy which effectively removed many of 'the people' from the conflict, the British established a system of fortified strategic hamlets into which vulnerable villagers were moved at night to isolate them from the insurgents. It is noteworthy that the Americans subsequently tried to introduce strategic hamlets in South Vietnam, but after some early success the tactic ran out of steam simply because of the sheer scale of the popular resistance to the Western invasion.

Moving to the Middle East, the Israeli Army's massive and permanent presence for forty years in the occupied territories and the Lebanon has made no difference whatsoever to Israel's long-term security prospects.

¹¹ Greg Mills, *Ten Counterinsurgency Commandments from Afghanistan*, Washington DC, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2007.

¹² See Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1967, pp. 22-52; and Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, New York, Schocken Books, 1972, p. 316.

¹³ The same systemic inability to comprehend indigenous social dynamics was also evident during the Soviet Union's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.

¹⁴ For the best account of this war see Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs*, Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1981.

¹⁵ Peter Dennis & Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950-1966*, St Leonards, Angus and Robertson, 1996, p. 165.

Indeed, it is because boots on the ground are unlikely ever to provide an answer to the 'war amongst the people' that defines the context of conflict in the Middle East that successive Israeli governments have clandestinely and illegally assembled an arsenal of some 200 nuclear weapons as their (perceived) ultimate security safeguard for the future.

Similarly, the constantly increasing number of boots on the ground has not made the slightest difference to the US's current invasion of Iraq. In mid-2007, at the height of yet another build-up of ground forces, insurgents continued to detonate bombs in major population centres on an almost daily basis, including one for the first time in the Iraqi parliamentary building inside Baghdad's heavily fortified 'green zone' administrative centre. Boasts from US commanders that their 'surge' of ground forces had reduced their own casualties seemed not only insensitive but also entirely to have missed the point, given that at the same time insurgents had 'set a record' for murdering Iraqi civilians.¹⁶

If invading armies were genuinely capable of understanding the people amongst whom they wage war, presumably tragedies like the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968 and the Abu Ghraib prison torture and abuse in Iraq in 2004 would never happen.¹⁷ It is likely to be many years before the full extent of the (unintended) consequences for the West of the alienation caused by Abu Ghraib and similar crimes committed by their occupying forces become apparent.

None of the foregoing is to suggest that there is no place for invasion and occupation strategies in defence planning. On the contrary, it would be facile to argue otherwise. Thus, for instance, the objective circumstances which obtained during World War II clearly demanded the seizure by force and the occupation of enemy-held territory, as they also did following Argentina's annexation of the Falkland Islands in 1982. Similarly, there can be a strong case for humanitarian operations such as the United Nations-endorsed intervention in East Timor in 1999, which was sanctioned by both the aggressor nation, Indonesia, and the people of the host polity, the East

¹⁶ 'Feared truck blasts toll of 500 sets grim Iraq record', *The Australian*, 17 August 2007, p. 9. See also 'Toll tops 200 in wave of attacks', *The Australian*, 20 April 2007, p. 10; Hamid Ahmed, '45 dead as bombs rock Iraqi capital', *The Canberra Times*, 17 April 2007, p. 8. Less than a week after the bombing in the Iraqi parliament scores of bombs were detonated around Iraq, especially in Baghdad, killing hundreds of people. At the time Baghdad was defended by three army divisions. Reported US military deaths in recent months have been: May 121, June 98, July 75, August 42. <www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties.htm> [Accessed 23 August 2007].

¹⁷ On 16 March 1968 a platoon of US Army soldiers murdered up to 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the hamlet of My Lai. Many of the victims were women and children. Three years later the US Army charged 14 officers with suppressing information relating to the massacre; most charges were subsequently dropped. For details of the torture conducted by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib see Seymour M. Hersh, 'Torture at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker*, 10 May 2004.

Timorese. It is to suggest, however, that boots on the ground are a mere number, not a universal strategy.

The Myth of The Three-block War

The concept of the three-block war is a subset of the notion of war amongst the people, and has been promoted with great success by Western armies and marine services. In combination with the broader scheme it provides the essential justification for expeditionary (invasion) campaigns. But like its progenitor, the three-block war is an intellectual house of cards.

First postulated in the late 1990s by the then-commandant of the US Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, the concept attempts to define a model by which land forces can successfully operate in an unfamiliar, probably hostile, primarily urban environment. It is noteworthy that the model grew out of the persistent failure of Western armies to cope with precisely those conditions during expeditionary campaigns in places like Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, the Gaza Strip and the Lebanon.

Krulak speculated that in any three contiguous urban blocks a soldier might be required to deliver humanitarian assistance in the first, act as a peacekeeper in the second, and fight a life or death combat in the third.¹⁸ (Some theorists have since suggested a fourth block in the form of information operations.) The model itself is an accurate enough description of the complex and challenging environment favoured in the past decade by many of the West's enemies. The problem is finding an army capable of satisfying the model's demands.

Australia's pre-eminent strategic scholar, Robert O'Neill, has identified the qualities Western land forces require to operate successfully within the setting of expeditionary operations, war amongst the people, and the three-block war.¹⁹ His findings describe a land force whose hypothetical standards frankly stretch credibility.

O'Neill starts by stating that Western armies are too small and must be expanded, but he does not say how this might be achieved without risking an unacceptable decline in quality. In the case of the Australian Defence Force,

¹⁸ Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War', *Marines Magazine*, January 1999; see also Max Boot, 'Beyond the 3-block war', *Armed Forces Journal*, March 2006; General John Abizaid, 'Combined Civil/Military Responses to National and International Events', *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007; and Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, 'Lessons Learned from Contemporary Operations', *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007

¹⁹ O'Neill, *op. cit.*

perennial recruitment and retention difficulties indicate that there is no quick or easy answer to this problem.

Despite extensive and costly public relations campaigns, the Army has consistently been unable to meet its recruiting targets, falling around 10 per cent short each year for the past decade at least. Because of that long-term failure the permanent force's strength actually fell between 2004-05 and 2005-06.²⁰ The highest proportionate loss rate occurred in the enlisted ranks; that is, among the men and women who do most of the frontline fighting and who have most contact with the 'people' when they are engaged in expeditionary campaigns. The Army fell 19 per cent below its recruiting target in 2004-05 and 11 per cent in 2005-06. Worsening this situation was a separation rate in 2005-06 of 12 per cent, with 20 per cent of all Army recruits quitting in their first twelve months. Furthermore, those overall figures tend to disguise the extent of the problem amongst the enlisted (operational) ranks because they incorporate the better recruitment and retention data relating to officers. If the ADF is to achieve its objective of raising two new army battalions—around 2600 combat troops—by 2016, it will have to lift its annual recruitment of fulltime personnel from 4670 to 6500, an increase of 39 per cent and a demand which seems likely only to aggravate the problem.²¹

Nor would a return to conscription be feasible. In Australia, for instance, conscription is politically unacceptable; while in the US the poor performance of some US Army units during the Vietnam War was in part blamed on reluctant conscripts and was one of the reasons the draft was abolished by President Richard Nixon in July 1973.

Described by one authoritative source as a crisis, the 'accelerating' rate at which the ADF generally and the Army specifically turns over its frontline people suggests that any attempt to construct and maintain a force capable of conducting war amongst the people is unrealistic.²²

If the situation with quantity is worrying, there is even less reason to believe that armies can achieve the qualities asserted as essential to prosecute a three-block war. Before discussing those qualities it is important to acknowledge the long-standing and deservedly fine reputation of Australian Army combat troops, and to note that substantial numbers who join at the

²⁰ Department of Defence, *Annual Report 2005-06*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, Chapter 4, Table 4.2. In 2004-05 the Army's permanent force strength was 25,356, while in 2005-06 it was 25,241, a decrease of 115. For the enlisted ranks the figures were 20,076 and 19,796, a decrease of 280. The discrepancy between the two reductions is largely accounted for by the recruitment of additional junior officers.

²¹ See Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, quoted in Patrick Walters, 'Recruitment, retention vital', *The Australian*, Special Defence Report, 26-27 May 2007, pp. 1-2; and Patrick Walters, 'Agility key for future defence force', *The Australian*, 17 May 2007, p. 4.

²² Sid Marris and Mark Dodd, 'Defence losing the war of attrition', *The Australian*, 25 April 2007.

most junior enlisted level eventually progress to senior rank through ability, hard work, and formal study. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the educational entry requirement for most combat mustering, including riflemen, patrolmen, and commando special forces, is Year 9; that is, three years below the standard for completing secondary school.²³ Recently announced reduced entry criteria which accommodate individuals with a prior record of illicit drug use and 'petty' crime, or who are over-weight, have visible tattoos, or poor eyesight, are unlikely to help matters.²⁴

According to O'Neill, a successful expeditionary campaign demands soldiers who are able substantially to 'erode' the cultural barriers that separate them from the people they are trying to help. In itself that is a sensible objective. But when those barriers are listed as language, religion and social mores, and a knowledge of local history, geography, institutions and economics, the argument stretches belief. And if that is not enough—remembering that in many circumstances these same soldiers are going to be, properly enough, in fear of their lives—they also have to master civilian skills (for civic aid programs) and have some capacity to 'enter into an informal exchange with indigenes'.²⁵

At the risk of labouring the point, we should always remember that to the local population our 'expeditionary' troops are their 'invaders'. The distinction is not mere semantics: it is utterly fundamental to any credible analysis of the contemporary battlefield. As Douglas MacGregor has argued, "the days when armies of Christian Europeans and Americans could occupy the countries of non-Europeans and dictate developments are over".²⁶ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that O'Neill's army of the future is based more on wishful thinking than on an objective analysis of what armies can, and cannot, do.

In summary, the competency limits imposed by recruitment and retention difficulties should be regarded as a continuing feature of the ADF and should therefore be factored in to concepts of operations and the national defence strategy.

The Limits of Land Power

The central point to emerge from this discussion so far is that for the past sixty years the outcome of most Western expeditionary campaigns has been dubious at best, disastrous at worst. The primary reason for this long history

²³ Department of Defence, *Careers, Personnel*, <<http://www.defence.gov.au/careers.cfm>> [Accessed 3 May 2007].

²⁴ Mark Dodd and Patrick Walters, 'Empty Vessels', *The Australian*, 8 May 2007, p. 15; and Gerard McManus, 'Nelson seeks Dad's Army', *Herald Sun*, 26 March 2007.

²⁵ O'Neill, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Douglas MacGregor, 'Casey Needs Fresh Thinking To Salvage Iraq', *DefenseNews*, 12 March 2007, p. 45.

of failure has been the patent inability of Western armies to fight amongst the people in general and to demonstrate the (unrealistic) range and level of skills implicit in the concept of the three-block war in particular. No rational analyst could be happy with the unintended consequences of the expeditionary strategy: as Robert O'Neill has noted in relation to Iraq, any gains that might have been made have been far "outweighed by the damage and insecurity" they have generated.²⁷

None of this is to say that Western defence forces should forgo the ability to occupy hostile territory by seizing and holding ground. Quite the contrary, the most cursory study of history indicates that this remains a necessary military capability, especially in the modern era for humanitarian intervention operations. The question is: how can we do it in a way that maximises the West's comparative military strengths and minimises its vulnerabilities? And the answer is, 'quickly and precisely'. Two indicative models may help illustrate this answer, the first proven, the second theoretical.

The proven model was used several times by American-led coalitions during campaigns in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia in the 1990s. Three features of the model are noteworthy. First, on each occasion the Western coalition fully exploited the immense comparative advantage it enjoys in applying precise firepower from a distance, primarily from air and sea platforms. Second, to the extent that Western land forces were involved, they tended to be relatively small numbers of highly mobile, highly skilled special forces. And third, whenever the warfighting situation needed large numbers of soldiers on the ground, indigenous armies were used, invariably to considerable effect, especially when fighting amongst the people.

Thus, during a humanitarian intervention against Serbian forces in Bosnia in 1995, Bosnian Croat and Muslim armies were successfully used to supplement NATO air power which was provided by air force, navy, army and marine manned and unmanned aircraft and by ship-launched missiles. Four years later a similar approach in Kosovo involved the Kosovo Liberation Army; while in Afghanistan in 2001-2 Western special forces and air power combined with a number of local armies, notably the Northern Alliance in the north and a number of predominantly Pashtun tribes in the south, to overthrow the Taliban.

While the indigenous armies played a minor albeit necessary role in the Balkans, they were critical in Afghanistan. The question was one of how to kill or force the surrender of substantial numbers of seemingly intransigent Taliban and al-Qa'ida terrorists. Periodically the Americans were confronted by besieged fortress-cities (Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kabul, Kunduz, Kandahar) whose enemy garrisons could have been destroyed either by bombing,

²⁷ O'Neill, *op. cit.*

which would have caused the death of non-combatants, or by massed warfare between the local armies, which was likely to involve heavy casualties, massacres and war crimes. In the event precision bombing was more effective against urban targets than perhaps ever before but on most occasions indigenous ground forces were required to clean-up pockets of resistance.

Muslim extremists will continue to 'fight with America' and the other nations that actively oppose them. What they are unlikely to do in future is to fight in mass, seeking instead to adopt the classic guerrilla tactic of operating in small groups that make high-value, high-publicity, hit-and-run attacks against civilian as much as military targets. Land forces will have a critical role to play in such campaigns but they will be land forces of a different shape and outlook from those that characterised 20th century armies. In the Australian setting the most useful soldiers are likely to be those who will be capable, first, of exploiting information derived from sensors such as AEW&C aircraft, surveillance UAVs, and perhaps satellites; and second, of complementing the operational flexibility and precise stand-off firepower of weapons systems such as strike/fighters, long-range missiles launched from surface platforms, UCAVs, AC-130 gunships, attack helicopters, and loitering weapons.

Turning to the theoretical, the indicative model here was developed by an American army general, Robert Scales, who has proposed a combined arms methodology in which armies "would not need to occupy key terrain or confront the mass of the enemy directly".²⁸ Implicit in Scales' concept is the judgment that in many circumstances it will be preferable either to destroy an enemy's assets or briefly but decisively strike against one vital point, rather than routinely try to occupy and seize his territory.

Under Scales' model, doctrinally and technologically advanced land forces would use fast-moving air and surface vehicles to make rapid and unexpected manoeuvre one of their primary characteristics. They would also work as an integrated whole with air strike forces, with the lead element at any one time being decided by the enemy's disposition. Should the enemy concentrate he would be identified and attacked with precision weapons launched from air platforms operating at standoff distances. Should he disperse and go to ground, not only would he negate his own ability to concentrate force, but he also would leave himself vulnerable to attacks by numerically and qualitatively superior land forces exploiting their rapid manoeuvre capabilities. Prototypes of this kind of operation were evident on occasions during the American-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001-2 and Iraq in 2003.

²⁸ Robert L. Scales, 'Checkmate by Operational Maneuver', *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2001.

For example, during the early phases of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, a small group of Australian, American and British special forces won a remarkable victory. Their immediate objective was to ensure that western Iraq was free of Scud missiles which might have been fired at Jordan and Israel, thus dangerously broadening the war. Not only did the allied forces meet that objective but they also effectively controlled about one-third of the Iraqi land mass. According to the then-chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, General Richard Myers, the key to that extraordinary achievement was the availability of air-surveillance, reconnaissance, information and strike—24-hours a day, seven days a week, which was fully integrated with the action on the ground.²⁹ This little-known operation may represent the epitome of the 90-year history of air/land warfare.

The crucial common feature in each of those illustrations was the brevity of the occupation and warfighting phases. It was only when Western armies overstayed their (strictly limited) period of usefulness and tried to become something they are not that they started to experience serious problems in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Defence of Australia

Since federation, Australian defence strategy has taken one of two main forms. Expeditionary campaigns officially styled as 'forward defence' have been the dominant model, with Australian troops fighting overseas alongside their British and/or American allies as a means of contributing to the defeat of (perceived) common enemies and of accruing security credits to be called-in should the Australian homeland itself ever be directly threatened. Examples include World Wars I and II, Malaya, the Korean War, Vietnam and, more recently, the Middle East and Central Asia.

The second, less practised, form has been the so-called defence of Australia, a strategy implicit in the Defence Act which established the Australian Army in 1903 and which brought together the colonial (state) militias as a national Citizen's Military Force, forbidden by law to deploy outside Australian territories. That defensive posture was superseded by the decision to raise the expeditionary army which fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front during World War I. In the 1930s the Australian Labor Party briefly revived the defensive approach by advocating a continental defence strategy, largely because of its more independent posture. The strategy slipped off the agenda once more during the expeditionary campaigns of World War II, Malaya, Korea and Vietnam before resurfacing again in the mid-1970s and finally achieving official status in the 1987 Defence white

²⁹ General Richard Myers, quoted in 'US Push to Base Forces on our Soil', *The Weekend Australian*, 17 January 2004, p. 001; and Greg Sheridan, 'US plan to "pre-position" arms', *The Australian*, 19 January 2004, p. 2.

paper.³⁰ Vigorously challenged by the Army, whose leaders believed the strategy marginalised their service, and then brought into question by a surge of expeditionary commitments under US leadership in the 1990s, the 1987 White Paper enjoyed only a short official life-span.³¹

Despite prevailing for the majority of federation, the expeditionary strategy has been a doubtful, even dangerous, proposition, as a review of the results (as opposed to the promotion of vested interests) has shown. The single unquestionably successful application was World War II, in which the territorial ambitions and moral depravity of the axis powers clearly threatened Australia's national survival and demanded an unconditional military response. Otherwise, though, throughout a diversity of eras and contexts the return has been dismal.

Forests have been sacrificed to the debate on cause and effect in World War I: was it a genuine global conflict whose geopolitics demanded an Australian contribution, or was it just the last hurrah of a jaded and degenerate group of aristocratic European cousins? Regardless of our answer, the 60,000 Australian dead and the 156,000 wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner from an enlistment of 300,000 and a total population of less than 5 million remains far and away the heaviest price ever paid for any expeditionary campaign mounted in the perceived national interest. Yet even that shocking premium was unable to return a dividend in 1941 when, for the very good reason that it was fighting the Nazis in Europe, Great Britain was unable to send forces of any substance to help Australia in its most dire hour of need against the threatened Japanese invasion.

The return on Australia's participation in post-World War II expeditionary campaigns is similarly contentious. Two firm observations can nevertheless be made. The first is that notwithstanding Australia's substantial contribution to the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the US—chosen during World War II to replace the UK as our 'great and powerful friend'—still sat on the fence when military tensions arose between Australia and Indonesia over the future of Irian Jaya in the early 1960s. As the aphorism has it, in international relations there are no enduring friendships, only enduring interests. And second, the decade-long invasion of Vietnam was a disaster for all concerned. None of the Western armies involved could do what it said it would despite a massive and continually increasing commitment of soldiers and firepower; millions of young Vietnamese, American and Australian men,

³⁰ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, Policy Information Paper, Canberra, AGPS, 1987. For the latest policy guidance see Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007.

³¹ Former deputy chief of army and land commander Australia, Major General John Hartley, has spoken of Army's 'unease' with the defence of Australia strategy: see 'Seminar Opening Address', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007.

among others, were killed; untold destruction was inflicted on Vietnam; and enormous damage was done to Western prestige.³² It is hard to see how those outcomes served Australia's national interests.

It is not yet clear whether a similar disaster will emerge from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but the indications are that the author Thomas Ricks' characterisation of this latest expedition as a 'fiasco' will be more right than wrong.³³ Perhaps most the most pernicious aspect of the occupation has been the torture and abuse committed by American military police at the Abu Ghraib prison, a shameful episode which has severely damaged the West's moral standing.

To summarise thus far, for sixty years now some of the most advanced Western armies, including those of France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel and Australia have excelled in brief air/land battles but have been singularly unsuccessful trying to fight protracted campaigns amongst the people. Two obvious questions arise: why do politicians continue to authorise such campaigns; and why do armies continue to believe they can win them?

For European politicians, shared land borders might provide a partial answer to the first question: reasonable fears of, say, a rapid spread of communal or ethnic violence might make an armed intervention seem the least worst option. But any government taking such a decision must be prepared for the long haul, as the British found in Northern Ireland, as the NATO-led Stabilisation Force found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as the US-led coalition and the International Security Assistance Force are currently finding in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively.

A fortuitous accident of geography has eased that kind of dilemma for Australia. As the only island continent, Australia is uniquely placed to exploit its geography as a factor in defence policy. Indeed, that is precisely what the 1987 Defence White Paper did, articulating a strategy based on controlling the air and sea approaches to the country's north and northwest, from which directions any significant military threat would have to materialise. There is no need to revisit in detail the long and heated debate which the 1987 paper generated. But its effect on the national defence strategy needs to be understood. Two points are central.

The first is that the paper did not discount either expeditionary campaigns or other expressions of offensive military action. What it did do was place a

³² The USSR suffered much the same experience during its disastrous invasion of Afghanistan from 1979-1988, when Soviet troops were utterly incapable of conducting war amongst the people.

³³ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2006. See also Henry Kissinger, quoted in Hans Greimel, 'Iraq worse than Vietnam, win impossible: Kissinger', *The Canberra Times*, 2 April 2007, p. W7.

hitherto absent emphasis on self-reliance and the ability to *control* events in the air/sea gap that surrounds our island continent. In essence, the paper shifted the essential strategic form from expeditionary to defensive. The verb 'control' is the key to strategy's logic, and it has frequently been the subject of misrepresentation.

Threat assessments generally start by considering three variables: capability, motive, and intent. Plainly, it would be misleading to suggest that any country or interest group presently possesses enough of each to threaten an invasion of Australia, a conclusion that has been seized upon by opponents of the defensive strategy to assert its irrelevance.³⁴ The issue is, of course, more subtle than that. Because of the difficulty of determining motive and intent, and because of the decrease in interstate wars (especially between the liberal democracies), the art of threat assessment has started to look less to the traditional approach and more to the central question of: *what is it that we need to defend?*³⁵ In other words, what are the fundamentals that establish the national well-being? If we accept that the world remains a dangerous and uncertain place, then strategic planning that focuses on defending those vital and largely identifiable assets and values makes eminent sense. Hence the emphasis on *controlling* events in Australia's air/sea gap.

The second point arising from the 1987 White Paper was Army's belief that it had been marginalised by the emphasis placed on a defensive as opposed to an expeditionary strategy. There was some truth in that, since any strategy directed towards controlling an air/sea gap is likely to give its force structure priorities to air and naval capabilities. The sensibilities of any of the single-services should not, of course, be allowed to influence strategic determinations. In this instance, Army supporters mounted a forceful, widespread and sustained public attack on the defence of Australia policy, drawing on history, politics, and tradition, and using the full spectrum of argument from scholarly analysis to personal ridicule.³⁶ In essence the campaign contended that Australia's defence strategy had always been based on expeditionary forces in general and boots on the ground in particular, that the invasion model has served Australia's national interests, and that it should continue to do so.

³⁴ See for example, Sheridan, 'Shadow Boxing'; and Australia Defence Association, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Between 1991 and 2003 the number of armed conflicts around the world decreased by more than 40%, international crises declined by 70%, and expenditure on international arms transfers fell by 33%. 'War and Peace in the 21st Century', in *Human Security Report 2005*, Vancouver, The University of British Columbia, 2005, pp. 1-2. For comment on threat assessment practices see the interview with Norwegian defence minister Anne-Grete Strom-Erichsen in *DefenseNews*, 30 April 2007.

³⁶ O'Neill, *op. cit.*; Evans, *op. cit.*; Leahy, *op. cit.*; Sheridan, 'Shadow Boxing'; and Australia Defence Association, *op. cit.*

It is hard to assess precisely the effect of Army's publicity campaign.³⁷ What can be said with certainty is that from the early 1990s onwards the Australian Defence Force's increasing involvement in expeditionary campaigns indicated that the 1987 policy had been overturned in practice.

Yet as the proverb goes we should be careful what we wish for. So far the unintended consequences of this policy reversal have been many and various and, more often than not, disastrous. By any measure they have been overwhelmingly inimical to Australia's national security. Of the major commitments, Afghanistan remains a work-in-progress of uncertain duration and outcome, and in the long-term the Iraq fiasco may prove far more harmful than Vietnam.³⁸ Robert O'Neill's conclusion in relation to Iraq bears repeating: any gains that might have been made have been greatly 'outweighed by the damage and insecurity' they have generated.³⁹ That conclusion is disturbing but it should not be surprising given that the expeditionary strategy which informed those campaigns is predicated on a capability that does not exist.

Conclusion

The fashionable notions of war amongst the people and the three-block war are currently being used by proponents of land forces to promote a self-serving preference for expeditionary campaigns. Yet both notions are based on capabilities that armies do not have and cannot acquire; that is, ironically, they expose the innate limits of land power. Additionally, and more insidiously, they encourage a military strategy which for over half a century has almost invariably either ended in failure and/or led to disastrous unforeseen consequences for the West.

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to adopt a primarily defensive military strategy which both avoids the flawed logic of expeditionary campaigns and offers a credible method for *controlling* the immediate environment and defending the fundamentals of our national well-

³⁷ But for a succinct analysis of the effect on force structure planning of the push for an expeditionary strategy, see Paul Dibb, 'Planning process needs a reality check', *The Australian*, Defence Special Report, 26-27 May 2007, p. 2.

³⁸ It is probably necessary at this point to mention the United Nations-sanctioned intervention into East Timor in 1999. Strictly speaking, the example should not be included, because the intervention came at the request of the Indonesian government. Indeed, the single most important factor in the campaign's early success was the Indonesian decision not to oppose the Australian-led landing. None of that is to diminish the ADF's performance, which was exemplary. But the subsequent show of triumphalism from much of the Australian media and general public suggests that the nature of the operation was misrepresented and misunderstood. Nor is it yet clear that the intervention will ultimately succeed, with the possibility remaining that Australia will have created a failed state in its backyard where none existed before: see Cavan Hogue, 'No escaping the burden of good intentions: The 'liberation' of East Timor is coming back to haunt us', *The Australian*, 12 March 2007, p. 8; and Nicholas Stuart, 'Botched battle brings home mission's failings', *The Canberra Times*, 6 March 2007.

³⁹ O'Neill, *op. cit.*

being. Affordable, rational, militarily credible and non-threatening, the defence of Australia should be the nation's preferred military strategy.

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