



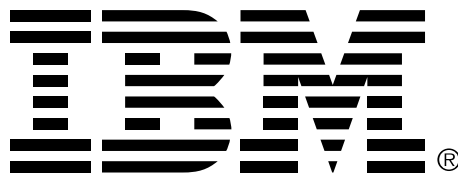
**Australian Security in the 21st Century
Seminar Series**

**Inaugural Presentation -
'Transformation or Stagnation? Rethinking
Australia's Defence'**

**Delivered by
Alan Dupont**

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I believe that we are on the cusp of a new, more dangerous and unpredictable era in global affairs that has profound implications for Australia's defence and national security. The tragedies of the Bali bombing and the World Trade Centre in New York are visible manifestations of a shift in the security paradigm which may, over time, prove as transformational as the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The indiscriminate brutality of contemporary terrorism is only one aspect of a broader assault on the rules and conventions that have governed international society for the last 100 years. The state on state conflicts of the 20th century are being replaced by hybrid wars and asymmetric contests in which there is no clear-cut distinction between soldiers and civilians and between organised violence, terror, crime and war.

Future wars will be the step-children of Somalia and Chechnya, as well as the sons of *Desert Storm*, and they may have more in common with the tribalism and anarchic savagery of the Middle Ages than the structured conflicts of the recent past. But they will play out on a global stage. And the perpetrators of anti-systemic violence will be adept in the use of modern technology and information operations. Preventing and managing these 'Mad Max' wars requires new strategies and approaches. However, there is precious little evidence that the architects of our strategic policy have grasped this point.

Over the past few months, Defence Minister Robert Hill has questioned some of the underlying assumptions of the defence orthodoxy. In my view he is right to do so because our strategy is firmly rooted in the past having remained essentially unchanged since the Dibb Review almost twenty years ago. Its central premise, encapsulated in the Defence of Australia (DOA) doctrine, is that protecting Australia against conventional military attack from a hostile state should determine the structure and capability of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Traditionalists aver that "forces structured for the defence of Australia and its approaches can meet all the tasks asked of it by the government" despite the unprecedented tempo and range of non-DOA activities and the repeated overseas deployment of the ADF.¹

Given the dramatically different strategic circumstances we now face I think this position is intellectually bankrupt, politically untenable and operationally

unsustainable. There is a serious mismatch between strategy, force structure and the emerging threats to Australia's security.

What Australia needs is a strategy for the future, not the past, and a transformed ADF structured to manage the very different security challenges of the 21st century. The strategic studies community can help by mapping what Senator Hill has aptly described as the contours and fault lines of a new strategic landscape. The ADF must be able to cope with a broader spectrum of threats than in the past and be prepared to go to the crisis rather than have the crisis come to us.

As a crucial first step, we must rethink a defence strategy that has four major failings. It is based on a misplaced geographical determinism that ignores the diverse and globalised nature of modern conflict; it has shaped the ADF for the wrong wars; it gives insufficient weight to the transnational threats which confront us; and it fails to recognise that modern defence forces must win the peace as well as the war.

Geographical determinism

For nearly three decades, the underlying assumption of our defence policy has been that proximity ought to determine strategic import. Traditionalists insist that geostrategic imperatives should shape strategy as well as force structure, an idea that finds visual expression in Professor Paul Dibb's map of Australia and its radiating concentric circles.

This is a surprisingly narrow and one dimensional view of strategy that has more in keeping with the pre-modern world of Halford Mackinder than the post-modern era of Osama bin Laden.² In an age of globalisation and transnational threats geography matters far less than it once did because of the compression of space and time. As the world has become painfully aware, state and non-state adversaries can strike from great distances in conventional as well as unconventional ways.

The great conceptual weakness of the Defence of Australia doctrine and its associated maritime strategy is that it is based on a notion of threat that takes little account of the declining strategic relevance of geography and the proliferation of non-military, non-

state challenges to security. The flaw in the maritime strategy is that the so-called sea-air gap to the north of Australia is not a gap at all. It is an archipelago occupied by numerous islands of varying importance, size and population where any conceivable military operation would require the effective use of land forces including the means to transport and sustain them.

For traditionalists who pride themselves on their understanding of the strategic importance of geography this is an inexcusable misappreciation. To assume that an enemy could be deterred or subdued primarily by air and naval power ignores the lessons of history in general, and Australian history in particular.

In committing so much of the defence budget to expensive ships and aircraft the “gatekeepers of strategic doctrine” have pursued a misguided policy that has severely weakened our capacity to deal with a range of problems in our own backyard, not to mention further afield.³ The reality is that we did East Timor on a wing and a prayer.

What wars will we fight?

A second, fundamental failing is that the ADF is structured for the wrong wars. DOA assumes that the most dangerous threat to Australia is a conventional military attack on Australian soil from a hostile, well-armed state. Interestingly, DOA advocates do not suggest that this is the most probable military contingency. On the contrary, they concede that a direct military attack is unlikely, or even “highly unlikely”, but that since a military attack would be a serious event, with potentially grave ramifications for Australia’s security, prudent decision-makers must consider outcomes as well as probability.

This curious inversion of strategic logic contradicts the first principle of risk management which is that the consequences of an action must be carefully weighed against the probability of its occurrence. To argue that a highly unlikely event should command the lion’s share of an organisation’s resources or be the principal focus of its attention would not get past first base in the political or corporate world. It is certainly not the basis for a sensible defence strategy.

So who is going to attack Australia? Traditionalists tend to dance around this question without actually answering it. The alleged ‘arc of crisis’ to Australia’s north has been a convenient peg to hang arguments for increased military spending or to endorse a strategic posture that bears little or no relationship to the region’s underlying problems which are overwhelmingly economic, social and environmental rather than military.

Often such notional threats are devoid of any plausible political context. A prime example is the assertion that a major power could lodge in the archipelago to our north and threaten Australia militarily from bases established there. I have yet to hear a convincing explanation as to how this might occur without precipitating a major regional conflagration and drawing a countervailing US response.

Are we to believe that Indonesia and China might threaten Australia with conventional military force in the next decade or so? Our own intelligence analysts think not. So why is the ADF structured for such improbable contingencies?

Weak states, like Indonesia, do not have the resources to mount invasions or cut trade routes. They pose security problems of an altogether different kind in the form of internal instability and the proliferation of low intensity conflicts that could spill over and draw in Australians as peace makers and peace keepers. They also provide fertile soil for terrorist and criminal activities that may necessitate an ADF response, but of a far different kind to that envisaged by the architects of our defence strategy.

A Chinese attack on Australia is even more implausible. Assuming that China wanted to threaten Australia militarily the People’s Liberation Army could neither deploy substantial forces to the archipelago nor sustain them for any length of time for at least a decade and probably more.

None of this is to argue that Australia faces no military threats only that those customarily posited are short on analysis and long on hypothesis. There is a worrying disjuncture between the gatekeeper’s fixation with war between states and the rise in intrastate conflict.

What kind of wars will the ADF have to fight? It is commonly assumed that the ADF will be pitted against the armed forces of another state, organised, equipped and trained to fight conventional wars. But such wars are increasingly unlikely. Iraq is the exception not the rule. Moreover, in any future conflict over Iraq Australia would only play a minor role.

More than a decade ago the Israeli military historian, Martin Van Creveld, forecast that conventional military wars between the regular, armed forces of sovereign states would decline in frequency and duration while low intensity conflicts within states conducted by warlords, criminals, insurgents, militias, terrorists and paramilitary groups would intensify. He surmised that such conflicts were most likely to occur in the developing world. These predictions have been dramatically borne out since Van Creveld audaciously challenged the Clausewitzian universe.

The ADF has repeatedly been deployed on international peace keeping and peace enforcement missions that bear little resemblance to the kinds of tasks anticipated, or deemed worthy, of serious consideration by a generation of Australian defence planners. The diversity and frequency of the ADF's operations will almost certainly increase as the war against terrorism gains momentum.

One does not have to see the attack of 11 September 2001 as a transformational event to acknowledge that the new age of terrorism has major implications for Australia's defence and national security. The reasons are threefold.

First, 11 September and its aftermath demonstrated the global reach of al Qa'ida and its capacity to forge transnational, strategic alliances with like-minded groups far from the organisation's home base in Afghanistan. Second, terrorists have lowered the threshold for the use of weapons of mass destruction because they are far more likely to use them to achieve their aims. Third, terrorists and criminals fight asymmetrically, using surprise, deception, detailed planning, networking and the selected use of advanced technology as well as cruder instruments of violence to combat the superior firepower at the disposal of the states they seek to undermine.

These are the classical techniques of guerrilla warfare adapted to the urban jungles of first and third world states. However, the prospect of the ADF having to engage in urban warfare barely rates a mention in the white paper although it is now exercising the collective minds of the best strategists in the US and Europe.

Asymmetric wars will not only be fought by terrorists and criminals. Other armed groups, who inhabit the lower reaches of the threat spectrum, will fight hybrid forms of warfare where modern, conventional weapons systems may be of limited use. Somalia is perhaps the pre-eminent example of a conflict in which overwhelming US firepower was blunted by a canny war lord's effective use of urban warfare and superior local knowledge to force a humiliating withdrawal. This was a salutary lesson in the limitations of modern warfare.

Dealing with messy third world conflicts involving peace keeping and nation building tasks is the real challenge ahead. Our commitment to Somalia was very much in this vein as was East Timor, where the ADF was confronted by a rag tag band of anti-independence militia supported by elements of the Indonesian armed forces. But East Timor was not in the script of any white paper nor did it fit the preconceptions of our maritime strategy.

East Timor showed up far more serious flaws in our force structure and strategy. Our Army lacked critical mass and the ability to sustain itself, our soldiers were deficient in basic equipment, and our navy and air force struggled to transport and resupply them.

These deficiencies were directly attributable to an inflexible and dysfunctional strategy that privileges high-end warfare and pays insufficient attention to the force structure implications of intervening in internal conflicts, within our region and beyond.

Core tasks – what should the ADF do?

A third element of the current debate concerns the ADF's core tasks. Or put another way, what exactly do we want our armed forces to do? Traditionalists believe that the ADF's principal task is to fight and win a conventional war.

I argue that the central purpose of the military is not just the application of lethal force. This is old thinking. Modern defence forces have to win the peace as well as prepare for war. The two are not the same. Winning the peace means that military personnel at all levels must be able to master the cultural, economic and political dimensions of a conflict and be discriminating in their use of lethal force. Peace operations are a pertinent example. But the choice is not between structuring for war or peace keeping, as some falsely assume. The defence forces of the 21st century must be structured for both.

In East Timor the ADF has to handle a wide range of peace keeping tasks, such as monitoring cross border movements, that require sound political judgement and sensitivity to local culture as well as the capacity to switch to combat mode when the need arises. Complex peace operations are now, by any objective measure, a major ADF activity.⁴ Yet the architects of strategic policy doggedly refuse to accept that they represent a core task for the ADF or that they should shape, in any way, the capabilities of the force.

Traditionalists also seem to have great difficulty in accepting the legitimacy of the human security, border protection and constabulary tasks that have been levied on the ADF in recent years and which now account for much of its operational activity. They contend that structuring the ADF for transnational threats would effectively "downgrade" the Force, shift the regional balance and weaken Australia's security.

Such thinking reveals a worrying inability to comprehend the way in which defence forces around the world are being transformed by the new strategic agenda. Transnational issues like terrorism, organised crime, illegal fishing and people smuggling have moved along the threat continuum towards the customary concerns of the military.

What does transformation mean?

The key lesson to be drawn from this analysis is that the ADF is not optimally configured or trained for today's threats, let alone those of tomorrow. While others restructure for the conflicts of the future we, for the most part, remain wedded to strategic concepts that have long past their use by date. It is axiomatic that the ADF should be able to defend Australia against military attack. But DOA is too narrowly conceived and disconnected from the security challenges of the contemporary world to provide the necessary strategic guidance for an ADF in urgent need of transformation.

It would be a mistake to characterise this call for strategic renewal as merely the latest incarnation of the long-standing debate between proponents of forward defence and continental defence. These tired old shibboleths reflect the linear thinking of a by-gone era and shed little light on the essential defence and security problems for Australia in the 21st century. Deploying force beyond our immediate neighbourhood is perfectly consistent with the defence of Australia's vital interests and should not be construed as fighting someone else's war.

We have been slow to recognise that the ADF must be capable of combating the irregular, low intensity conflicts that now predominate and to counter post-modern, hybrid threats which require a different repertoire of military skills to those of the Cold War. A force designed for state-on-state conflict will struggle to manage the multifarious security challenges posed by neo-nationalist guerrilla movements, terrorists, new age mercenaries, pirates, people smugglers and global crime syndicates.

Transformation is not a prescription for radical change. Nor does it mandate increased defence spending. Significant transformation can be achieved through a modest reordering of priorities and adjustments to existing programs within the existing budgetary framework. As US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld observes, it can be achieved by new ways of arranging, connecting, and using existing capabilities. It is worth recalling that the Blitzkrieg unleashed on Europe in 1939 to such devastating effect was accomplished by only a 13 percent transformed German Army.

Transformation means that the ADF must acquire more high-value, niche capabilities and additional land forces equipped for a wide range of contingencies across the threat spectrum that can be despatched rapidly, with adequate protection, sustainment and command and control. The ADF must be trained and configured for multi-faceted tasks. And while advanced technology is essential to the knowledge edge it must be usable and appropriate, for the new wars as well as the old. Unfortunately, some of our existing systems fail this crucial test.

One linguistic fig leaf and two straw men

Before concluding I want to correct some recent mis-characterisations of the defence debate. Let us be clear that this is not an argument between regionalists and acolytes of a so called 'expeditionary school' who want to structure the ADF for distant conflicts. Rather, it is a contest between the inertia of traditionalist who see no need to change our strategy and force structure and the vision of reformers who seek a modest transformation of both.

It is pure sophistry for traditionalists to portray themselves as regionalists. This linguistic figleaf cannot disguise the fact that the emperor has lost his conceptual clothes. The whole thrust of the Defence of Australia doctrine was to develop a force specifically designed to protect Australian territory from a conventional military attack, not to advance and defend Australia's regional interests. The deficiencies so manifest in our East Timor deployment are ample evidence of this reality and give the lie to the proposition that traditionalists are misunderstood regionalists.

Miscasting reformers as supporters of an expensive, expeditionary force structured for high intensity warfare in distant theatres is similarly disingenuous. I am not aware of any service chief or senior defence official who seriously advocates such a force and wants to structure for armoured warfare on the Korean peninsula - or anywhere else for that matter. I'm sure that Senator Hill doesn't.

Sometimes traditionalists resort to knocking down and picking apart two straw men a tactic whose exposure is long overdue. The first of these is what I call the straw man

of strategic relativism. It has been argued, for example, that the transformation of the UK defence force has no relevance for Australia because the UK operates in a benign security environment whereas Australia lives in a hostile neighbourhood. I think the British might dispute this assessment.

War in Europe might be unthinkable but it is certainly very thinkable in Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East which are as close to the UK, and as strategically relevant to London, as Southeast Asia is to Australia. And the British have a few things to worry about at home, as well, including illegal migration, terrorism and the possibility of a regression to violence in Northern Ireland.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard Australia's security challenges as unique or dramatically different from those of our allies. In fact the opposite is the case. When it comes to peace operations, forming coalitions of the willing and the war against terrorism we are all in this together. Australia can learn much from British reforms as well as those of our other friends and allies.

The second straw man wears a big dollar sign. When their other arguments fail, the default position of traditionalists is to argue that we can't change our force structure because it will be too expensive. Let me quote Paul Dibb here:

“Remember that the defence budget is finite: we need a tough-minded planning framework to decide what gets funded and what does not. Developing an expeditionary force would be hugely costly.”⁵

I agree wholeheartedly with these sentiments, but the point is that no one else is talking about a costly expeditionary force. A transformed ADF may actually save money by reducing spending on capabilities that lack versatility or are prohibitively expensive to maintain and run. Transformation makes sound budgetary as well as strategic sense.

In conclusion, the task ahead for our defence planners is to manage the transition from the legacy force to an ADF better structured and prepared for the threats of today as well as those of tomorrow. It is a challenge they cannot afford to fail.

Thank You.

Alan Dupont

Notes

- ¹ Paul Dibb, 'Tinker with defence policy and risk attack', *The Australian*, 30 October 2001, p.13.
- ² In 1904, Halford Mackinder delivered a seminal paper to the Royal Geographic Society in London arguing that European civilisation had been shaped by the struggle to repel a succession of Asiatic invasions. His conceptualisation of a pivot area, comprising central Asia, adjacent to an "inner crescent" of nations accessible by sea power privileged geography as the determining factor in world politics. But like other geographical determinists he neglected to make allowances for technological advances and the power of ideology.
- ³ The term "gatekeepers of strategic doctrine" was used by the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, in his address 'Future Wars-Futuristic Forces' to the Land Warfare Conference, Brisbane, 23 October 2002.
- ⁴ Complex peace operations is a term that denotes any combination of peace keeping, peace enforcement or peace building activities aimed at preventing or minimising conflict and promoting stability, especially in weak or failed states. It refers to operations governed by Chapters VI (peaceful), VII (using all necessary means) and VIII (regional arrangements) of the United Nation's Charter.
- ⁵ Paul Dibb, *Does Asia Matter To Australia's Defence Policy?* The Australian National University's National Institute for Asia and the Pacific Public Lecture, Parliament House, Canberra, 23 October 2002.