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The role of the Army in a maritime strategy

an address to the Institute on 26 March 2013 by

Lieutenant General D. L. Morrison, AO
Chief of the Australian Army



Australia's defence is based on a maritime strategy which involves finding security in Asia, not from Asia, by controlling the northern sea-land-air-bridge to Australia. The strategy is implemented by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to which Army contributes ready, relevant, robust land forces for expeditionary operations. Today, the ADF is more capable than at any previous time.

Key words: maritime strategy; army; Australia; Plan Beersheba; force generation; amphibious capability.

Thank you for inviting me to address you on a topic near and dear to my heart: the role of the Army in a maritime strategy. At the outset allow me to compliment the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on being one of the great thinking institutions which has consistently provided a wonderful forum for the discussion of defence and security issues affecting our nation.

In addressing Army's role in a maritime strategy, I intend to give the term definition, to argue why its conscious, or unconscious, application over our history has shaped the current Army that I head, and then describe Army's modernisation plan, which is our response to the challenges that will face the nation in the future.

Preamble

Unfortunately, the defence and security debate in Australia is often made shallow by a media focus on personalising the great strategic issues that face the nation. Thus, Service Chiefs can be questioned as to why they would seek to join the public discourse about defence and security. I find that intriguing; but I remain hopeful that the example being set in the United States, the United Kingdom and other great democracies, complemented by a greater interest in the security debate in Australia (which the RUSI has helped bring about), is seeing a maturing of the environment in which these great matters are considered. So, I shall be unambiguous in this paper.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has deep and enduring bipartisan support from the nation's parliament. There has been a strategic commitment of resources to the ADF over the last decade which has the ADF now more capable than at any time in our history.

The elected government must balance defence expenditure against all of the demands on the federal fiscal outlays. While I am writing about strategy, I do so fully cognisant of my responsibilities to build an affordable force for the future. I am sure that we are doing that, but if it requires modification in the light of future

budgetary priorities, then we will do it all the better for the public examination of the nation's security requirements.

Nothing in this paper should be taken as an insight into the work being done to develop the new Defence White Paper. That is a matter for government. While I most certainly reference the White Paper of 2009, and use it to show how, at a government and defence level, we have deepened our understanding of the nation's security, the new white paper will reflect our government's policy and, as a servant of that government, I will work tirelessly to bring it to fruition.

Australia's Maritime Strategy

Neither to me, nor to the Australian Government, does the term 'maritime' denote anything mystical or esoteric about Australian strategy. Indeed, according to our current strategic guidance contained in the extant White Paper of 2009 (Department of Defence 2009), the defence of Australia is to be achieved through a maritime strategy. It is our official policy.

To some this is interpreted as a major departure from previous strategic guidance. It is not. The seminal White Paper of 2000 (Department of Defence 2000) renewed the long-standing commitment of Australian governments of all persuasions, to seek to deny the use the archipelagic approaches to our nation by a hostile power, as well as to supporting our allies in upholding the global order further afield. This was only seen as controversial or novel by those with a very limited view of Australia's role in the region and the world, and a poor grasp of our history. In fact, during the only period when Australia departed from a declaratory grand maritime strategy, we nevertheless implemented it. During the two decades that followed the Vietnam War, we sent contingents of various sizes and levels of capability all over the world, notably Africa, while clinging to a declared policy of continental defence.

Since our very foundation as a nation, Australia has implemented a maritime strategy. It has been our uninterrupted mode of strategic conduct throughout

our history as a sovereign state. Indeed, if one considers the most modest contributions to operations in support of British global interests by our various colonies before federation, one can almost discern that maritime strategy forms part of our national grand strategic DNA.

Maritime strategy – definition

In the interests of clarity, let me define a couple of terms. No one has better defined maritime strategy than the greatest of all maritime strategists, Sir Julian Corbett, whose seminal work in this area ranks alongside that of Clausewitz in his meditations on war on land. Corbett defined maritime strategy thus:

“By maritime strategy we mean the principles, which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor. Naval strategy is but that part of it which determines the movements of the fleet when maritime strategy has determined what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces ... it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone” (Corbett 1911).

According to the father of maritime strategy, it was evident that only the harmonious collaboration of land and naval forces could achieve strategic decision. In his most oft quoted passage he asserted:

“Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do” (Corbett 1911).

Befitting a policymaker rather than a scholar, Sir Edward Grey, a near contemporary of Corbett’s, memorably observed that: “The British Army [must be] a projectile fired by the Royal Navy” (Grey 1925).

To the uninitiated, the use of the term ‘maritime’ of course conjures up the sea. Some, who should know better, mistake naval strategy for maritime strategy as defined above by Corbett. When applied to Australia’s geo-strategic environment, such views have in the past seriously distorted the development of strategic policy in this country, especially in the decisive period following the end of the Vietnam War. Then, for a mercifully brief period, Australia sought security in its geography. In one sense this was understandable. We had withdrawn from an unsuccessful foreign war after a long and costly commitment. Britain had announced that it was withdrawing its military forces from east of Suez, and our major alliance partner, the United States, had enunciated the Guam Doctrine – which explicitly demanded that America’s allies assume the primary responsibility for their own defence. Our policymakers decided to make necessity a virtue. They embraced a philosophy of defence self-reliance. Sadly, they did not really grasp the budgetary nettle, nor the full implications of that term. Rather, what was delivered was a force development methodology that we in the

Army would dismiss as ‘situating the appreciation’. I have been quite public in expressing my concern that now, in the wake of Afghanistan, some are again recommending that we return to a pallid imitation of it, despite the strategic challenges that we face now and into the future.

The problem with continental defence theory

The sometimes described ‘continental defence theory’ holds that any threat would obligingly materialise after generous warning times. Any deficiencies in our military inventory would be rectified over this time; but in the event that any power sought a lodgement on our continent, they would be defeated by our air and sea forces using stand-off weapons. It was enticingly elegant, as are most strategies that fail to take into account the vicissitudes of politics, human behaviour and strategic uncertainty – all that comprises what Clausewitz referred to as ‘friction’ (Clausewitz 1873). Thankfully it was never put to the test.

The theoretical underpinnings of this doctrine are weak. Its patina of elegance rests on what, in my view, is a poor reading of our geography. There is no sea-air gap to our north, providing some form of strategic moat. Rather there is a sea-air-land bridge to Australia which is dominated by the 13,000 islands of the greater Indonesian archipelago.

In March, I had the honour of addressing a conference in Indonesia with some of the most astute strategic thinkers in our region. They were as one in welcoming Australia’s direct engagement with them in issues of maritime security, counterterrorism and actions to curb trans-national crime. We achieve this through finding security in Asia not finding security from Asia, as a former prime minister astutely observed. Continental defence restricted us to that latter paradigm and skewed our force development in a way that tied us to our own land mass. It sent the message that we feared invasion from some ill-defined horde. Thankfully, it has been consigned to history’s dustbin and during my tenure as Chief of Army I will do my best to keep it there.

Moreover, despite the superficial comfort of cowering behind ‘the moat’, on the only occasion Australia faced a direct threat of invasion, much less sustained direct attacks on our homeland, we secured our nation through a maritime strategy in a coalition setting. The air raids across Australia’s north, 71 years ago, were the direct result of the defeat in detail of our ill-prepared land forces on Ambon, Timor and the Dutch East Indies, which permitted an enemy to operate against our homeland with near impunity. They attacked us on land, from land. Aircraft were merely the means. Ultimately, the Japanese were defeated by the careful orchestration of land, sea and air forces throughout the South West Pacific Area of operations.

Too few realise how entwined were the battles of Kokoda and Guadalcanal, and the extent to which the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway ultimately

achieved effects on land through denial of force projection bases to the Japanese. They were not fleet engagements of the type Mahan would have recognised. They were naval components of a maritime strategy.

The simultaneity of effort across the Pacific theatre ensured that the Japanese were unable to concentrate decisive force in New Guinea or the Solomon Islands. In other words, Australia was saved not by the Battle of the Arafura Sea, but by the land effects generated by joint forces throughout the South West Pacific Area. And only when Japanese land forces were bypassed or defeated in detail did the threat abate. Needless to relate, our naval and air superiority was integral to achieving this land effect.

Australian strategic logic

But if the continental defence aberration was based on a poor understanding of geography, it was based on an even poorer appreciation of history. For the enduring truth of Australia's grand strategic culture is that we have always implemented a sophisticated maritime strategy. There is a golden thread of logic running through Australian strategic practice that extends back past federation to the Maori Wars and the Sudan; and it is this: Australia has always supported the maintenance of a benevolent global order provided by the maritime supremacy of the dominant liberal democratic power of the day.

We have been fortunate that, since European settlement here, only two powers have occupied that pivotal global role – Great Britain and the United States. We have enjoyed unique ties of culture, shared institutions and kinship with both of them. And we have shared their desire for freedom of the seas and a global order amenable to free trade and liberal democracy.

Make no mistake, whatever the perspective that asserts Australia has been bled white while fighting 'other peoples' wars', we have been a net importer of the security provided by the liberal democratic power which has ruled the seas. And without denigrating in any way our military sacrifices, we have been able to develop our economy and prosper, despite reasonably low defence expenditure, across much of our history compared to many developed nations.

The commitment of Australian forces, especially land forces, to distant theatres has not been a folly. It is sophisticated grand strategic practice, which the doyen of Australian political journalism, Paul Kelly, has rightly assessed as one of the few truly bi-partisan trends in Australian public policy. Rather than being exploited by great and powerful friends, Kelly believes Australia's policy has been characterised by shrewdness bordering on genius. So ingrained and intuitive is this practice of contributing to a benign world order through expeditionary operations, that it warrants the use of that over worked term 'strategic culture'.

The acclaimed Australian scholar, Mike Evans, has gone further than Kelly. In a compelling monograph,

Evans (2005) examined the risks to Australia's interests when we have flirted with doctrinaire abstractions like continental defence, or when we have attempted to improvise a maritime strategy while paying lip service to continental defence and not funding either approach appropriately. The most damaging confluence of these trends occurred in the period from 1976 to 2000 when Australia continued to aspire to global military commitments in Namibia, Somalia, Rwanda, Bougainville and numerous United Nations missions, while adhering to continental defence. The dissonance to which Evans referred was the yawning chasm between our declaratory (funded) policy and our recurring strategic practice. The Army bore the brunt of this unsatisfactory contradiction.

There are currently some worrying trends in our strategic policy debate which warrant a reprise of why we have taken the force development decisions we have over the past decade. That is why I have gone to some lengths to establish the first-principles case for an Army in the context of a maritime strategy and to explain that land forces are innately maritime forces. Maritime strategy is designed to achieve land effects.

The Australian Army

I propose now to explain why the particular structure and size of the present and proposed Army is appropriate for this strategy. Again, I regret that this necessary. But it seems at least once every generation the Army must resist the seductive siren call that whispers: "Just bring our soldiers home and stay away from foreign wars. All will be well. We need not maintain a fully equipped standing Army. We can sit out the crises in faraway countries of which few have heard."

But, to paraphrase John Donne, in the era of globalisation: "No island is an island. We are all part of the main." That is conspicuously true of Australia, which is now a proud member of the United Nations Security Council. Our geography provides no protection. Indeed, our proximity to the friction points in Asia demands rational hard-headed defence planning in support of nuanced diplomacy.

And our nearest neighbour and one of our longest continuous security partners, Indonesia, stands astride the link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, through which so much of our trade passes.

Those who pine to, in geo-strategic terms, pull the doona back over their heads and stay home from history's version of Monday morning, miss the point. History does not take vacations. Sadly, we inhabit the world of Hobbes not Fukuyama – less solitary, but vastly more brutal. We need a robust Army capable of participating in joint maritime strategy more than ever.

Assuredly we are providing savings, which the elected government of the day has legitimately asked of us. Accordingly, we are devoting every ounce of our intellect and experience to develop the Army that the country needs and is prepared to pay for.

We are a fine Army. Our people are splendid and you and the nation can be proud of them. They are hardened and honed by war. Our individual and collective training systems are the envy of the world. However, we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot, as I tell the Army often, benchmark ourselves against the Taliban. Rather, we must build on our success, follow government direction to the letter, and not believe our own press.

In addition to seeking to marry strategic guidance to our lessons learned from operations, Army closely monitors the changing character of war. Moreover, we cut our garments according to the cloth we are provided. We must live within our means. As the Service Chief responsible for raising and training land forces for our government, these are all factors I weigh in varying degrees in planning our force development. I think we are on the right track.

Plan Beersheba

We are rationalising the Army through Plan Beersheba. At its core, it streamlines our Army to end what many of you will remember as the 'Army of ones'. For good reasons, but for far too long, we tried to keep too many disparate capabilities alive under an outmoded mobilisation model which was better suited to the global wars of the first half of the last century. We tried to keep hollow capabilities on our order of battle in case we faced a war of national survival and needed a professional mobilisation base. Today, the requirement is for ready, relevant, robust, land forces, capable of rapid deployment, whether to wars or to humanitarian crises, as part of modularised, joint and often whole-of-government force packages. And that applies to Reserve personnel as well as those serving in the Regular Army.

Recently, I read a profound monograph by the splendid British strategist Colin S. Gray, who called for a return to the fundamental and enduring truths of strategy (Gray 2013). He made an obvious, if too-often overlooked, point that we in the West thrive on semantic and philosophical discourse. Especially in the national security arena, the post-Cold War era has witnessed a proliferation of theoretical debate about war. Experts, promoting their latest fad, come and go, often leaving confused policymakers and force planners in their wake. But since the rediscovery of counterinsurgency, hybrid wars, cyber war, operations other than war, and the 'revolution in military affairs', to name but a few, Gray thinks we have substituted abstraction for clarity. There is not much new in the way of war that Clausewitz, or for that matter Thucydides, would not recognise. Forces need to be able to fight and survive on a lethal battlefield. Granted, lethality has increased dramatically. But the rudiments of the application of force are enduring.

Gray's insights heartened me. To some extent Australia has been somewhat immune to the worst excesses of the *Zeitgeist*. We do not possess a massive

national security apparatus where thousands of very bright people are paid to develop cutting-edge thinking on the blatantly obvious. As Gray argues persuasively, too often since the Cold War, each time we have encountered an enemy whose tactics or culture differs from ours, we have purported to discern a new way in war. Our response has been to develop elaborate intellectual edifices, which impede rather than enhance our understanding of war. Too often we have rapidly adapted our doctrine or force structures to meet this perceived novel threat, rather than drawing on the deep well of enduring experience and our settled body of strategic thought.

One reason that Gray's argument resonated with me is that I am as guilty of this as anyone. As a professional I have imbibed deeply of the concepts generated by think tanks and war colleges since '9/11'. Yet after a decade at war, I am becoming more sceptical of much of their output. Much old wine is being poured into new skins. As the Confederate Civil War soldier, Nathan Bedford Forrest, once said: "War means fighting, and fighting means killing". That is not to revel in anti-intellectualism. But armies tend to take a long time to develop doctrine and fighting power. One should not regard them as experimental organisations for each transient intellectual speculation about war.

Australia's relative lack of size has been an unexpected advantage in this regard. We have healthy regard for the lives of our soldiers, borne of the bloodletting of the Western Front and the acrimonious conscription debates of the Great War here. So we have responded quickly to recent developments in the degree and diffusion of lethality. This explains the rapid increase in the combat weight of our Army in light of the proliferation of man-portable weapons and improvised explosive devices over the past decade. We started the current era as a light infantry force, so we did not need to agonise over shedding legacy Cold War systems to configure for irregular war. Indeed, we needed to enhance our combat weight merely to survive against contemporary jihadists.

The compression of the so-called spectrum of conflict is a tactical rather than a strategic issue. Distinctions between 'war' and 'operations other than war' or 'limited' and 'hybrid' war confuse rather than help professional soldiers. Of more use is my variant of Nathan Bedford Forrest's inquiry. Will we need to fight? If so, we need to deploy balanced, combined-arms teams, seamlessly linked to joint fires through digitised sensors and communications. Are we fighting state or non-state actors? Well, our force posture will look about the same regardless.

And, as a small Army, we need to be versatile. We must be able to survive on the lethal battlefield of the 21st century while fighting irregular enemies, but also be vigilant in preserving foundation war-fighting skills to match a near-peer adversary. That latter requirement is what the Army exists to do. It is what makes us a distinct profession, subject to a legal status and laws different

to any other in our liberal democracy. We exist to defeat the nation's enemies, if necessary through the application of extreme violence. We must be able to engage in joint land combat, against the forces of a nation-state, in the archipelagic approaches to this country. Under Plan Beersheba, we are well advanced towards meeting that objective.

In passing, let me pay tribute to my two immediate predecessors, Ken Gillespie and Peter Leahy, who rationalised our stove-piped functional command structure to make Beersheba the next logical step, while enhancing the combat weight of the Army to be able to conduct combined-arms combat in complex terrain in the digital age.

Under Beersheba, Army can now field three similarly-organised multi-role combat brigades, sustained by three enabling brigades, and rounded out and supplemented by six Reserve brigades. It not only looks rational, it is. Moreover, it extracts real value from limited resources. We can standardise our vehicle fleets and brigade inventories. Our training systems and career management systems no longer have to tailor our officer and soldier career planning to provide for recurrent service in Townsville, or Darwin, or Adelaide for our people, according to narrow career profiles.

The cascading effects of this on family harmony, job satisfaction, and career development are incalculable. Standardisation in place of niche specialisation will transform both sustainment and training. Indeed, the Beersheba Army is already realising considerable savings in every area of raising, training and sustaining land forces, which is why it represents the apotheosis of both sound force structuring and sound fiscal practice. Previously, too many of our people spent most of their careers posted back and forth to a single niche brigade, often at great cost to their spouse in terms of employment and their kids in terms of education.

The development of the Adelaide node is a great development, which will have a beneficial effect on retention and posting stability. The closer resemblance of the Army in barracks to the Army in the field is unprecedented and brings substantial savings. If the Army had not devised Beersheba, I suspect the Department of Finance would have. That is why I am resolute in arguing that we do not seek the false economy of cutting either the size or the inventory of our Army. Work I commissioned on the fiscal lessons of the last three decades revealed that restoring capabilities that have been disbanded or mothballed is vastly more expensive than sustaining such capabilities. So called seesaw, or yoyo, growth and contractions deplete skill and morale, and shed highly-trained people.

We are about the right size now. I hope we can maintain it. But more importantly, for the first time since I joined the Army, we have a viable force-generation model.

Army welcomed being freed from the shackles of the Defence of Australia paradigm by the 2000 White

Paper. But until the introduction of the 'Adaptive Army' and the creation of Forces Command, followed in turn by the development of our multi-role brigades, it was more about hope, rather than method, to suggest that we were capable of providing the brigade group capable of sustained operations, and a battalion group capable of simultaneously meeting a more immediate contingency in our inner arc, which government demanded. Under Plan Beersheba, we can generate those forces capable of follow-on rotations and sustained operations.

Amphibious capability

Rounding out Beersheba is the development within the 3rd Brigade of a discrete, modest amphibious capability based on the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. Not since the Second World War have we been capable of conducting meaningful amphibious operations. The ability to project land forces from sea-based platforms into inaccessible littoral areas in our region is essential to our ability to contribute to the stability of our neighbours, including undertaking humanitarian relief operations.

This is a modest capability and should not alarm our friends in the region. Indeed, it better allows us to cooperate with them on the issues of shared concern about piracy, transnational crime, terrorism and disaster relief. And it allows us to send capable land forces to support our friends in times of crisis, to reassure and to assist with training and logistics, in order to contribute to the security of our immediate environs.

I hope over time that we can develop links with the amphibious forces of our friends and allies in the region. Senior military personnel from Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand and the United States have discussed training opportunities with me, which is a very positive development and augurs well for the future.

Conclusion

This is a challenging and fascinating time to lead the Australian Army. We are in good shape, peopled by some of our finest Australians who live by our values of courage, initiative and teamwork, and who respect our past, but are not gulled into believing their own press, nor into benchmarking themselves against the Taliban.

Nevertheless, allied to these force structure changes is a necessary focus on improving our culture. When I assumed command, it was apparent that we needed to squarely face some serious problems; in particular the manner in which we treated our female soldiers, those from ethnic minorities and those with alternative sexual preferences. There was, and still is, a recurring problem with alcohol abuse and social media, which has periodically detracted from our reputation. Since 1995 there have been 13 substantial inquiries into aspects of Defence culture, often prompted by public exposure of sexual assaults as well as harassment based on race or gender, some of which

had culminated in incidents of self-harm by the victims.

I am no longer comforted by the cliché that a 'few bad apples' are the cause of these attacks on an inclusive and diverse Army workforce. We in the ADF occupy a special constitutional role. Any nexus between an Army such as the one I aspire to lead, and one where predatory and bullying behaviour is ignored, or worse, condoned, is absolutely unacceptable. Our monopoly on violence and the particular place we occupy in our national psyche, demands that we must earn and maintain a high level of trust among our community. They are entitled to expect more of us than other institutions.

I want to increase the number of women and Australians from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the Army because we will be a more capable institution as a result. If we are to be a ready, relevant and robust force in the third decade of this century, then we need to be a better reflection of the society that we are charged to protect. The ADF's cultural improvement strategy, 'Pathway to Change', and the work done by eminent Australians like our Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, are making that a reality. This is because you cannot address fundamental strategic issues in our future without getting the culture of our Army into better shape. We are on the journey; and the nation and its government rightly expect that we will be an exemplar organisation.

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The Author: After graduating in Arts from the Australian National University, David Morrison joined the Australian Army in 1979. He was commissioned from the Officer Cadet School, Portsea, to the Royal Australian Infantry Corps and served in Bougainville as Brigade Major of the 3rd Brigade in 1994. He commanded 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, in 1997–1998; in 1999–2000 was Colonel Operations,

Headquarters International Force East Timor; and commanded 3rd Brigade in 2002–2004. He commanded the Australian Defence Colleges in 2006 and was Deputy Chief of Army in 2008. He was appointed Land Commander Australia later in 2008 and Forces Commander in 2009. On promotion to lieutenant general, he became Chief of Army on 27 June 2011. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1999 and an Officer of the Order in 2010. In 2012, the United States awarded him The Legion of Merit, Degree of Commander. [Photo of General Morrison: Department of