

**ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Supplementary submission to the
2013 Defence White Paper**

This submission supplements the Institute's primary submission made on 29 November 2012. It takes into account more recent events and information that the Institute has received, especially the proceedings of the Institute's 2nd International Defence and Security Dialogue on 26 February 2013 which examined "Australia's immediate neighbourhood: the strategic outlook and its defence and security implications".

The Strategic Outlook

Our region

Over summer, the strategic outlook for the Asia-pacific region has become less benign. Tensions between China and Japan in the East China Sea have intensified following the election of 'nationalist' leaders in both countries. The more the 'brinkmanship' card is played, the greater is the chance of a miscalculation which could lead to open conflict.

North Korea has taken a further step closer to producing a credible nuclear weapon and now seems to be beyond the control of its sole patron, China. It may be only a matter of time before it is capable of delivering a nuclear warhead which potentially could strike northern Australia.

Nations throughout the region are continuing their arms build-up, especially their navies and air forces, and are modernising their armies. *It is not a time for Australia to seek a 'peace dividend' post Afghanistan like its NATO allies can.* As former United States Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, likes to say: "It's unthinkable that we could wake up tomorrow and find that a major war has broken out in Europe; it's quite conceivable that we could wake up tomorrow and find that a major war has broken out in Asia."

Our neighbourhood

In contrast, at present, the likelihood of overt external aggression into our neighbourhood seems remote. While the capability for it undoubtedly exists in our region and is growing, the equally essential intent (desire) is lacking. This, however, could change relatively quickly. Our neighbourhood is rich in natural resources, both terrestrial and marine, and they are being increasingly exploited by mainly private interests from outside the neighbourhood. The inflow of mainly illegal Chinese migrants which has accompanied this external investment is causing resentment internally and has led to riots in Tonga and Papua New Guinea. Further, if neighbourhood countries were to attempt to control this resource exploitation or to prevent it outright, this could lead to armed conflict unless managed well diplomatically.

The main security threats faced by our neighbours currently are of internal origin and arise from deep-seated cultural norms struggling to interface with a 21st century globalised world. These are exacerbated by factors such as a population explosion and associated demographics favouring youth, urbanisation, unemployment, crime (including transnational crime), 'wantok' ethics and the like. While Australia can suggest better governance, education, infrastructure development, policing and the like, our neighbours resent us attempting to force our solutions on them – 'neo-colonialism'.

Natural disasters, of course, given the geography, are a fact of life. Also, climate change is putting more energy into the weather systems that drive the weather-based ones. Consequently, these are becoming more frequent and more severe. The need for Australian and New Zealand assistance in dealing with them is likely to increase commensurately and will be welcomed by the victim states.

Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste seeks to be a friend with all other nations – it has little option. It enjoys warm relations with China and claims to have excellent relations with Indonesia currently. This, however, is strongly dependent on the current Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his policies. It could change following the presidential election in 2014. Timor-Leste has been discussing bi-lateral defence treaties with both Australia and Indonesia. It would prefer to establish a tri-lateral defence pact among Australia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste to guarantee its security.

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Timor Leste is grateful for the security assistance received from Australia and New Zealand since 2006, but considers that it is no longer necessary. Indeed, within a year or two, it hopes to be in a position to contribute troops to neighbourhood task forces as required.

Fiji

Fiji has responded to being sent to ‘diplomatic Coventry’ by Australia and New Zealand by bypassing these two nations and finding other friends with whom to deal.

- Excluded from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), it has built up the Melanesian Spearhead Group from which it has excluded Australia and New Zealand. This sub-regional group is becoming more important than the PIF as it represents more than 85 per cent of the land area and population of the region.
- Fiji has attracted trade, financial support and military training from other nations, especially China and Indonesia. These newer partners have now settled into the gap left by the departure of Australia and New Zealand; and Fiji has now settled down with its new partners.

Australia and New Zealand will now have to win the right to be accepted back into Melanesian fora and into Fiji in particular. A circuit-breaker is needed and hopefully the 2014 Fiji elections will provide this – no matter how imperfect they are from an Australian perspective. [Note: Indigenous Fijians, a minority in their own country, will never accept constitutional arrangements which put the Indian majority in a position where they could legislate changes to indigenous land ownership.]

Neighbourhood Task Forces

Over the last decade, when the need to provide peace-keeping, stabilisation and/or disaster relief assistance has arisen (e.g. in Bougainville, Aitape, Timor-Leste, the Solomon Islands and Aceh) usually a neighbourhood task force has been assembled to deliver the aid. The task force has usually been led by Australia, with Australia providing the force structure and most of the logistic support for it, and with other nations contributing niche capabilities as able and needed. For such a model to work, it needs acceptance by all neighbourhood governments, excellent teamwork and a high degree of interoperability among the participating agencies – defence and police forces, and government and non-government aid agencies.

There, indeed, seems to be wide acceptance of this model among our neighbours, including New Zealand. This model is currently working smoothly in the Solomon Islands, where Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Tonga have been contributing rifle platoons to an Australian-led rifle company group (currently provided by the Army Reserve’s 8th Brigade, New South Wales) on peace-keeping duties. We must not lose this teamwork after the Solomons commitment ends in a month or two. Combined planning, training and exercises must be employed to sustain it.

There is general acceptance of Australia as the leader of such task forces, although in some circumstances it might make more sense for New Zealand to lead them. Apparently, whenever other regional powers such as France, Indonesia, and the United States, have had the opportunity to take part, they have declined to participate, let alone lead, and have simply offered words of encouragement. The lesson is, as a neighbourhood, we need to develop the capacity to solve our own problems.

Fiji is currently excluded from these neighbourhood task forces. Potentially, though, it would be capable of making a strong military contribution and would willingly do so, if admitted back into the ‘fold’. Its defence leaders, though, have been training with the Indonesians and Chinese, not us, so interoperability could be problematic until Fijian training and systems were realigned with ours.

Dr Alan Ryan of the Australian Civil-Military Centre, however, has told us that these task forces may not always be the best vehicle for delivering aid when needed, particularly towards the civilian end of the spectrum where greater flexibility and individualism may be warranted, especially as one moves from crisis management to recovery and development. If so, the white paper should spell out the circumstances where contingency planning should be based on the task force model and those where other models are to be preferred.

Defence Assistance to the Neighbourhood

Our neighbours greatly value the defence and security assistance that they have received in the past from Australia and New Zealand. Effective policing of the neighbourhood’s fishing and

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exclusive economic zones is considered vital and our neighbours wish to be empowered to do it properly.

In this context, excising Fiji from the long-range maritime air surveillance programme has not only punished Fiji, but its neighbours also. They all desire its full restoration. Similarly, there is a strong desire throughout the neighbourhood for the Pacific Patrol Boat Programme to be reinvigorated and modernised, with patrols better planned and coordinated.

Towards a Credible Neighbourhood Military Force

As mentioned in our main submission, the 'Plan Beersheba' Australian Army will only be able to sustain a brigade group of three infantry battalions (one Army Reserve) on operations. This is a very small force. It would be suitable for peace-keeping, disaster relief and humanitarian operations. Although trained for war-fighting, it would be too small to undertake meaningful war-fighting by itself. It could only do so as part of a much larger force.

Should war-fighting come to our neighbourhood, it would be nice to think that the United States, France and Indonesia would give us a hand. We cannot count on that, though. Indeed, they could be fully occupied with their own problems elsewhere at the crucial juncture. Our contingency planning should be based on the neighbourhood repelling the enemy using its own resources.

Is this practicable? We believe that the neighbourhood could develop a credible force which would be a strong deterrent to any incursion and could potentially defeat one should it occur. We suggest that it should be based on six infantry brigade groups; trained, structured and equipped for fighting in the islands; and which could be deployed either independently in a dispersed mode or concentrated to form two divisions as the situation demanded. Australia's share of this force would be three brigade groups, New Zealand and Fiji should provide one each, and Australia, Papua New Guinea and Tonga should provide a battalion each to the sixth brigade. This is not achievable at present for any nation, but if the white paper were to set this as a medium-term goal, then planning, training, exercising and equipment purchases could be directed to this outcome. We believe it would be eminently achievable.

Army Reserve Depot Closures

The Institute does not normally address relatively minor matters of this type, but it is a white-paper issue and it is of concern to a number of our members.

It was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 25 January 2013 (page 7) that "dozens of military bases and army reserve depots face possible closure under a drive to save money amid a \$5.5 billion cut to defence spending". This report was based on a leaked draft of the government's 2013 defence white paper which allegedly provides for the rationalisation of Defence's bases and depots as a cost-saving measure. Among the Reserve depots being considered for closure apparently are Pymble, Blacktown and Rockdale, with those reservists to be transferred to Randwick, Richmond and Holsworthy.

Some members of the wider Reserve family see this as part of a cynical long-term strategy to turn the Army Reserve into simply low-level 'hole pluggers' for the Regular Army. There is also understandable concern that if you take away local depots, then Reserve soldiering can be limited to those who can afford to take weeks at a time off to undertake training in blocks and then be deployed to places like the Solomon Islands for peace-keeping and humanitarian tasks.

For our part, we do not hold to the 'cynical plot' theory. While there may be some in Defence who still see the Army Reserve as an unnecessary luxury, despite its operational successes of the last decade in the Solomons and East Timor, we doubt that the proposals in the draft white paper are anything more than an attempt to save money, with the Reserve being asked to bear its share of the cuts. By choosing valuable real estate to sell (e.g. Pymble depot), it helps meet the cuts required with less overall impacts than might otherwise be necessary.

If these changes were made, though, having fewer, more centrally-located, depots might force a change to traditional Reserve culture by making weeknight parades harder and harder to sustain – given the unrealistic travel times many soldiers would experience. Reserve activities might increasingly be confined to weekends and longer periods.

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Also, a key element of the ‘traditional’ Reserve culture has been viewing the local depot as a social club-house for the company/platoon (analogous to that of the local football club). This has been particularly important for attracting and retaining the 18- to 26-year-old demographic. This cultural element would need to be down-played and, in its place, increased emphasis would need to be placed on ‘professionalism’ – Reserve soldiering as a part-time career.

Cultural change of this magnitude, however, is not easily achieved and would need strong leadership at unit and sub-unit level, backed up by equally strong support from the wider regimental family. Nevertheless, no matter how good the leadership, there would inevitably be some currently-serving members whose personal circumstances did not enable them to make the transition and it would probably take the Reserve considerable time to recover from these losses, if ever, if past experience of such changes is any guide.

There is another cultural element to be considered, namely local parochialism. In the case of Pymble depot, Sydney’s northern suburbs have been providing citizen soldiers to the Australian Army and its predecessors for 153 years (since the raising of the St Leonards Rifle Corps in 1860) and Pymble depot currently has a platoon on peace-keeping duties in the Solomon Islands. Community support has played a strong part in sustaining this 153-year commitment. If the depot were to be closed and the soldiers were told to transfer to Randwick, the community reaction would likely be to let the eastern suburbs provide the soldiers in future. This would be unfortunate as the eastern suburbs has not had a particularly good record of providing citizen soldiers for some years. The situation would be similar if Blacktown depot were to be closed – we need infantrymen from the western suburbs.

While we appreciate the dilemma that Defence faces, we would counsel against closing these crucial infantry depots, which have been the backbone of the peace-keeping effort over the last decade, if at all avoidable.

Conclusion

In this supplementary submission, we have just touched lightly on a few key issues. Should you wish us to expand on any of them or to address other matters that we have not raised herein, please do not hesitate to contact us. [Doug Roser T: (02) 9817 1759]

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27 February 2013

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