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United Service

Informing the defence and security debate since 1947

The ANZUS Alliance: Australia's Role

The newly re-elected Obama administration in the United States has lost no time in stating publicly its disquiet at cuts to defence spending in Australia – defence expenditure is budgeted to be 1.56 per cent of gross domestic product this financial year (the smallest level since 1938) – at a time when other key nations in our region are increasing theirs. Indeed, the cuts are viewed as threatening our credibility as an ally. There is also a perception that Australia is taking advantage of the training of United States marines in Darwin to cut back its Army and that, in effect, we are “freeloading” on the American taxpayer.

In the current economic climate, it is understandable that there may be a political desire to seek a “peace dividend” and to reduce defence expenditure following the completion of the commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Against this, Australia is being asked to take lead responsibility within the alliance for the security of our immediate neighbourhood which faces a range of potential defence and security threats necessitating responses such as peace-keeping, border protection, crime-fighting, resource protection (especially in the maritime domain), disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Further, the possibility of high-level war-fighting occurring, while seemingly remote at this juncture, cannot be ignored. The capability for it exists and is being expanded within the wider region, and while political intent is currently benign, intent can change quickly¹.

To undertake the lead role in our neighbourhood, Australia needs a standing Defence Force that can deal with the likely contingencies. To deter the emergence of, and if necessary respond to, the less likely ones cost-effectively, a credible, well-trained, strategic reserve will be essential.

In geographic and infrastructure terms, much of our immediate neighbourhood has changed little since World War II. The lessons learned by Australian forces in New Guinea, New Britain, Bougainville and Borneo from 1942 to 1945 should be revisited and incorporated as warranted into current defence planning and doctrine. Amphibious operations should be considered the norm and the whole Defence Force should be trained for them. In this context, the United States Marine Corps model has much to commend it and should be examined carefully in formulating our defence force structure.

We also need to consider Australia's role *vis-à-vis* that of our neighbours. A model that has emerged over the last decade in the delivery of peace-keeping, stabilisation and disaster relief assistance in Bougainville, Timor-Leste, the

Solomon Islands and Aceh, is for a neighbourhood team to be assembled to deliver the aid. The team 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 inter-operability among the participating agencies – defence and police forces, and government and non-government aid agencies.

While there is some comfort with this model, there may well be other models that are equally good or preferred in different circumstances. For example, the following neighbours could conceivably lead and/or contribute forces under different circumstances: Fiji, France, Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga. If there are better models, these need to be flushed out as the model(s) chosen will have a key influence on Australia's defence force structure over the next three decades.

Australia's next Defence White Paper, which is due to be released by mid next year, will need to address these issues². It will need to formulate a credible, cost-effective Defence Force able to exercise leadership in our neighbourhood, not one intended primarily to provide niche capabilities to allied forces in distant theatres. Such a defence force will not come cheaply, but is a vital national investment. The “Achilles heel” of the last white paper was that subsequent budgets did not allocate adequate funds to its implementation. It is vital that the next budget allocates sufficient resources to enable the 2013 White Paper to be fully implemented. We can be sure that our neighbours and our United States ally will take a close interest in the outcome.

David Leece³

¹The acquisition of military capability, both human and *matériel*, can involve long lead times. It typically takes at least a decade to develop middle-ranking leaders, and acquire/introduce into service new weapons systems and platforms (such as ships and planes), even if purchased “off-the-shelf”.

²These issues will also be examined during the Institute's 2nd International Defence and Security Dialogue on 26 February. The Dialogue's outcomes will inform the Institute's submission to the current and future defence white paper processes.

³David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is a vice-president of the Institute. These are his personal views.