

Time to move on in the defence policy debate

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Paul Dibb has been an important participant in the Australian defence policy debate. His ideas were influential in the 1987 Defence White paper, 'Defence of Australia.' (Department of Defence, 1987). Whether you are a proponent or opponent, the 'Defence of Australia' has long set the parameters for the defence policy debate in Australia. It institutionalised the concept of 'strategic geography' as the force structure determinant for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). However, it is time for the policy debate to move on and look beyond the primacy previously accorded to strategic geography. Put simply, the reality of today's security environment no longer fits the theory that underpinned the 'Defence of Australia.' In his recent article *'Is strategic geography relevant to Australia's current defence policy?'* in the Australian Journal of International Affairs (Dibb, 2006) Dibb seeks to re-affirm the importance of strategic geography to the defence policy debate. Three key problems arise from this attempt: First, the article's strong support for the re-establishment of the link between strategic geography and force structure ignores the reality of defence operational activity over the last two decades. Secondly, the article does not correctly situate the role of geography and the national interest in strategy formulation. Finally, the analysis of Australia's involvement in past conflicts, the term 'expeditionary' war and the decision to update the Army's tanks is flawed.

Discontinuity between policy and practice

The year 1987 was significant militarily because it saw Australia's first serious effort to mount a major military operation since the end of the Vietnam War – an attempt to assist Australian citizens in Fiji after that nation's coup. Reporter Graeme Dobell has referred to that operation (code named Operation Morris Dance) as a 'dangerous high seas farce' (Dobell, 2003:14). An objective review suggests that this description is generous. Every thing that could go wrong did – from ships not being capable of carrying troops and their required weapons, to serious problems associated with the helicopters required for the task. Australia's ability to conduct the military activities that the national interest demands has come a long way since 1987. The contrasts between the Fiji deployment and that of Operation Astute to East Timor in May 2006 are stark. Yet there are also many similarities.

Both operations were in the national interest and occurred within the region. This is illustrative that many of our interests do lie close to Australia. This is something that adopting a force structuring principle other than a geographic one does not need to refute. Operation Astute shows that the debate about adopting a regional or wider focus for our interests does not need to be an either / or proposition. Both operations required the services to co-operate and act jointly. The successful deployment of the 'combined arms battle group' on Operation Astute could not have occurred without the joint efforts of all three services. Both circumstances required timely intervention and the deployment of a well-balanced and controlled joint force capable of protecting itself, and others, whilst at the end of a long logistics supply route. The 'high order' offensive / defensive air and maritime capabilities favoured by the Defence of Australia force structure model were not required in either instance. This in no way means that there is not a requirement for jet fighter aircraft or submarines in the ADF. It merely demonstrates that not every situation will require the use of every item in the defence inventory.

The difference between Fiji in 1987 and East Timor in 2006 is that the capabilities of the ADF now reflect an appropriate evolution from those originally optimised for acting within a 'Defence of Australia' construct. This evolution has been slow and often painful. It has been widely acknowledged that elements of Australia's defence capability were still inadequate during the

deployment to East Timor in 1999. Some of these shortfalls were highly problematic. The sensible work done by the Government and the ADF to correct these shortfalls is evident in the smooth redeployment to East Timor in May 2006. Yet Dibb's recent article depicts the work to address the capability shortfalls handed down by the 'Defence of Australia' paradigm as 'recidivism.' Dibb suggests that the nexus between strategic geography and the capabilities of the ADF acquires needs to be re-established. The operational examples detailed above provide a suitable context in which to evaluate this suggestion. It shows that the nexus between strategic geography and ADF capabilities has proven increasingly irrelevant over the last twenty years. There is no case to re-assert this link based on the historical or current record.

Geography in context

Geography is important. However, it is but one of many equally important constraints in the development of defence policy and strategy. Hannibal's march through the Alps, the German thrust through the Ardennes that unhinged the Maginot Line and the Japanese capture of 'Fortress Singapore' all demonstrate how a fixation on geography in defence at the expense of other factors can dangerously skew strategy and force structure. This can be even more problematic today. The advent of globalisation and the acceleration of technological development have shrunk the world. The rise of non-state actors in the international system and the mass mobilisation of ideas via the internet further challenge old visions of isolation from other states and ideas. Our geography has not changed, but what it means to Australian security has changed significantly since the publication of 'Defence of Australia' almost twenty years ago.

The emphatic assertion in Dibb's article that a nation's geography is the mother of strategy is wrong. Many other constraints may be equally relevant to the strategic circumstance of a state. These include, but are not limited to, national wealth, development, population, culture, religious beliefs, alliances and system of government. These are a diverse and important range of considerations, yet none should be the paramount objective in the development of strategy. The enduring objective of policy should be securing the national interest. Geography is not an objective for Government defence policy. It is a constraint equal of many others that affect the achievement of the national interest.

A simple definition of the national interest could be that it is 'that which seeks to guarantee the nation's security', in the broadest possible sense. The acquisition or preservation of security has always been the most essential requirement and responsibility of the state. Australian prime ministers have repeatedly emphasised that they believe the most important task of government is national security. The presentation by the Howard Government of this as its most fundamental task highlights the vital link between politics, security and strategy. Theorists from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz and Liddell Hart have emphasised the central role of politics in strategy and conflict. In a secular western liberal democracy such as Australia, the definition of the national interest is the responsibility of the duly elected government. The article raises the concern that the national interest is a 'woolly idea.' It is true that it can be subject to the vagaries of political imperative. The national interest might not be as absolute and obvious as our geography. However, an objective examination of the record of the last few decades shows a remarkable degree of continuity in the definition of the national interest, irrespective of which political party is in government.

The myth of 'other people's wars'

Dibb's article makes the claim with regard to Australia's pattern of engagement in conflict that '...the practice was to mount expeditionary forces to fight in other people's wars at great distances from the homeland' (Dibb 2006: 248). This assertion of 'other people's wars' implies an association of such a situation with 'bad' defence policy. This is because advocacy of strategic geography requires acceptance as fact, the proposition that our important fights will only occur in our region. This does not stand up to scrutiny of the historical context within Australians have fought. During the Boer, First and Second World Wars the Australian population was comprised

of people of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic origin. They almost universally identified themselves as citizens of the British Empire. That they were fighting in 'other people's wars' by fighting for the British Empire would have been an alien concept to them. Any discussion of the concept of an 'Australian' national interest would have been resolved forthrightly in favour of participation in the war. There was no national interest as a 'British' nation in 1914 in witnessing the rise of a hegemonic colonial Germany in our region. Concrete national interest also applied in 1939 when confronted with the possible demise of our greatest source of investment, trade and perceived security.

An element of 'selfish' interest has always been present when the Government decides to commit to involvement in a conflict. This is true in the modern era as well. This is why the ADF has found itself involved in tasks as diverse as peacekeeping in the Western Sahara, intervening in the Solomons or fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. These expressions of Australian interest can vary from seeking influence within the United Nations, working for stability in our region or attempting to destroy a support base for Islamic Terrorism. The presence of an element of national interest in our engagement in a conflict belies the claim that operating outside the geographic constraints of 'Defence of Australia' signifies involvement in 'other people's wars.' This higher strategic issue has an impact on the more prosaic matter of structuring the defence force.

Balance in force structure policy

Modern armed forces fight in a 'joint' environment where all of the aspects of force must operate in balance and complement each other. The combined effect of all the parts operating together in battle is greater than the sum of the individual parts. An appropriate analogy is the selection of football team. A team with all players picked with the appropriate skills for each position will always defeat a team selected with only fullbacks. It is the same with the Defence Force. Advocacy of a force structure policy that supports a strong naval and air component at the expense of the land component is at the heart of Dibb's article. Such a structure leaves the ADF unbalanced and less capable. Professional military officers within the ADF rarely advocate such a structure. They know from years of joint training, exercising and operations that the credibility of our defence force rests on its capability to undertake effective joint operations. This requires recognition and support of the vital role of each component, dependent upon the situation.

The Chief of Army has pointed out that the 'Sea-Air' Gap, (crucial to the 'Defence of Australia' policy paradigm), is actually a 'land-sea-air-land' gap. It is a bridge with land at both ends. This clearly requires forces capable of acting, and winning, at both ends of the bridge. Sir Lawrence Freedman summarised this requirement in his recent Adelphi Paper *The transformation of strategic affairs*, '...very few political objectives could be directly met by air attack alone. Its use can influence the victim's calculations, but it cannot achieve the physical control of enemy decision making that is always at least a theoretical possibility following a land offensive'(Freedman 2006: 63). If the ADF is to serve our national interest, either within the conceptual area previously referred to as our 'area of direct military interest' or beyond, balanced treatment is required for all capabilities in force structure policy. Policy centred on the strategic geography paradigm is problematic as it affects the achievement of this critical capability balance. The example of Operation Astute is illustrative of the flexibility inherent in structuring our forces on judgement of the likely nature and scale of military operations that the government may require, rather than just geography.

'Expeditionary' war

The article implies that any policy or acquisition that can be associated with the term 'expeditionary' is somehow sinister. This position confuses means and ends. Unless the requirement for the use of our armed forces arose in Darwin, Townsville, Perth or Sydney, Australia's geography would require the nation to mount an expeditionary force. Whether the national interest requires military action in the remote North-west of Australia, Melanesia or

Namibia, the type of military capability required to optimally conduct and support the deployment is remarkably similar. Hence, the acquisition of C-17 aircraft or larger ships capable of adequately supporting amphibious operations is not indicative of planning to commence expeditionary crusades to the far-flung corners of the globe. Rather, it demonstrates an awareness of the need to rectify an important shortfall in the current capabilities of the ADF. If these capabilities had already arrived in the Australian inventory, the deployment for Operation Astute might have been even more timely, flexible and cost effective. This goes to the heart of what the Government and the nation rightly expect of the ADF in terms of providing credible and efficient options for various situations. Having the capacity to deploy forces, either within or beyond our immediate geographic region does not mean that we would or should. Another common misconception is that the desire to conduct expeditionary warfare is inherently driving the requirement to update Australia's tank capability.

Australia's tank update

Contrary to the suggestion in Dobb's article, the Australian Army has never spoken about using tanks to destroy terrorist cells in our neighbourhood. The article suggests that the acquisition of new tanks reflects the development of 'heavy armoured forces.' This is not the case. There is no suggestion by any credible ADF or Government figure that tanks are required for the type of massed tank battles that took place last century. The Government decision to proceed with renewing the Army's tank capability reflects an appreciation of the requirements of modern warfare. Today's battlefield is more complex than in any previous era. The proliferation of highly lethal, easily acquired, man portable weapon systems has rendered infantry more vulnerable than ever.

Tanks offer infantry, as part of the combined arms battle group, protection and firepower to reduce this vulnerability. The hard won experience of the Australian Army points out that there is no substitute in combat for the ability to manoeuvre into close proximity of an enemy and destroy him with direct fire. However, the tank is more than just protection and firepower. It is also equipped with important sensors and communications, making it an important 'node' in the age of information driven warfare. This is why all credible modern western armed forces operate main battle tanks. It is why many nations within our region either have acquired, or are seeking to acquire, them. Tanks are an essential part of the Australian inventory. They give the Government a wider range of response options should the national interest require it. They address our duty of care to Australians who are required to fight on behalf of the nation. Their ongoing presence in the Australian Army affords Australia's forces a better chance of winning in a wider variety of circumstances. If the government has to take the decision to wage war, it needs to maximise the chance of winning. To deny Australia use of an adaptable and important tool would be bad policy. Tanks save lives.

Conclusion

Australia does not need to accept a defence policy or force structure optimised for the relatively limited circumstances characterised by the 'Defence of Australia' / strategic geography paradigm. Recent developments have shown that it is possible to have a force that is flexible both within and beyond our immediate region. Such a policy allows Australia the high order defensive capabilities favoured by the 'Defence of Australia' paradigm, while still enabling the ADF to operate successfully on regional mission such as those to East Timor or the Solomons. Our geography is important and has a role in the formation of policy. Continuing debate over this issue is not worth the opportunity cost to other aspects of Australia's defence policy development. Circumstance may treat Australia unkindly if we continue to lose ourselves in internecine policy debates about any one strategic factor or bet our future security on needlessly limited strategic paradigms. It is time to move on from the tired old arguments of the last century and face up to the vital new challenges confronting us in this one.

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