

Army should be careful with its aim

Hugh White

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The army is worried. Next week's federal budget will be tough on defence, and each of the three armed services fears the axe will fall on it. But the army is the most fearful because after 13 years of high-profile operations in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is coming home to face an awkward question: what does it do now?

It is a situation the army has faced before. It came home from Vietnam and was cut from 12 battalions to four and relegated to a supporting role in the "Defence of Australia" posture. Earlier this month, the Chief of Army voiced concern the same thing would happen again.

The years since Peter Cosgrove led INTERFET into East Timor have been good for the army. It has been the ADF's busiest period since Vietnam, and the nature of operations has given the army overwhelmingly the largest role, restoring it to its traditional place as the first among equals of the three services. It has regained its role as the principal instrument of Australian strategic policy, and its core fighting strength has doubled to eight battalions. It does not want to return to the bad old days.

But there will be no more operations like Afghanistan for a long time. The US is tired of the "war on terror". More importantly, Washington no longer sees the Gulf region as the critical testing ground for Australia as an ally.

Barack Obama has swung America's strategic focus to Asia. For the first time since Vietnam, Australia will now be judged in Washington by what we do in support in our own region. The question for the army, then, is what role it can play in supporting Australia's strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific.

There is no chance the army will be relegated to the low-level operations on Australian soil that were its only role after Vietnam. The operations in East Timor and the Solomon Islands are winding down, but Australia will face continuing demands to undertake military interventions in small island states in our neighbourhood. Indeed, Australia's strategic stake in our small neighbours will only increase if, as seems likely, the wider Asian scene becomes more contested between the US and China. Australia's deepest interest in the islands to our north has always been to prevent them being used as bases from which larger powers could attack Australia.

If strategic rivalry grows between Asia's great powers, Canberra will become more concerned that it does not spill into our neighbourhood. That makes the political stability of our weak neighbours more important to us than ever, and increases the imperative to intervene when this stability seems threatened.

Such interventions are a job for the army. The problem is that this is not the kind of job the army wants to do. Stabilisation operations among our close neighbours are often closer to police work than full-scale military operations.

That is why the army has its eyes on a much bigger task. As the risk of strategic rivalry between major powers grows, Australia has to decide what it could and should do to support its strategic interests in Asia, either as a US ally or alone. This is a big question, because we are talking about the prospect of Australia being drawn into a major war.

The army wants the leading role. The idea is to transform itself into a primarily amphibious force, able to deploy and fight from the sea. At one level this makes perfect sense in Australia's essentially maritime strategic environment. The Howard government was persuaded, and committed what will probably end up being \$15 billion for two amphibious assault ships, three hi-tech air warfare destroyers and a fleet of "marinised" helicopters. Its Labor successors have happily gone along with all this.

Does this make strategic sense, however? No one doubts that Australia needs an army with the ability to deploy forces by sea. But can an amphibious army provide Australia's main strategic force in a major war? There are two strong reasons to say it cannot.

First, there is the problem of getting the army safely to an overseas battlefield, and back. Technology means it is becoming easier to sink ships and harder to protect them. Major Asian powers such as China have taken advantage of this to build their sea-denial capabilities. Even with US help, Australian amphibious forces would be vulnerable in a major war.

Second, there is the problem of scale. Even if it doubled in size, the army could not put more than a few thousand troops ashore anywhere in Asia. Against Asian armies with hundreds of thousands of troops, there is no chance that Australia could achieve any significant strategic results with the land forces we could deploy and sustain by sea, assuming they were not sunk on the way.

Australia faces difficult questions about the best way to sustain the strategic weight of middle power in the complex world of the Asian century, but amphibious assault forces are not the answer. Australia does need the capacity to project power in Asia, but we must find a way to do so that does not rely on vulnerable ships.

Meanwhile, we also need to reconsider how to defend this island continent. It is a long time since anyone has seriously considered the army's role in this, but the fact that Australia is a continent as well as an island suggests it might be more important than has been previously recognised.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at ANU and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute.