

LOWY INSTITUTE PERSPECTIVES

**GRAND STRATEGY, NATIONAL SECURITY
AND THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE**

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Grand Strategy, National Security and the Australian Defence Force

Alan Dupont

Is it an oxymoron to talk about a grand strategy for Australia? After all, we have rarely articulated a national strategy and certainly never a grand one. For much of our history a filial attachment to the national designs of Britain and later the United States, constrained our capacity to think for ourselves. Fortunately that era has long past. Since the late 1960s governments of all political persuasions have given considerable thought to Australia's place in the world and fundamental questions of identity and purpose.

What are our values and interests as a nation? Are we part of the Anglo-sphere or a more cosmopolitan but still essentially European transplant on the margins of Asia? Are we of the region or a bridge between East and West? And what exactly does being a middle power mean in terms of our national ambitions and aspirations?

Australian governments traditionally address such questions in defence and foreign affairs white papers which are considered to be the most authoritative official pronouncements of national intent and how we see the world. The problem, however, is that Defence and DFAT, with their sectoral interests and authority, cannot speak for the nation on grand strategy which, by definition, is the process by which a state matches means and ends in the pursuit of security.¹

The most serious lacuna in our strategic documentation is not an updated defence white paper but the absence of an overarching declaration of our national security objectives and a strategy for achieving them. A national security strategy can no longer remain in the 'nice to have' basket given the seminal nature of the changes in the international security environment.

In an age where security concerns are central to the business of government and involve a plethora of agencies other than defence and foreign affairs, there must be a road map for prioritising our national security objectives and identifying the most effective instruments and policies for achieving these objectives. This is the essence of an effective grand strategy.

Without one, Australia will be condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past where policy is made on the run, there is no benchmark for matching ends with means, our security concerns are too often conflated with military threats and policy makers lack crucial coordination and implementation tools.

I say this despite the welcome establishment of a national security division in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. But we have to go further. Our coordination tools need refinement, opinions, ideas and contributions should be sought from outside government, and a declaratory statement on national security should clearly spell out the roles and responsibilities of individual government departments.

Of course, this is not a uniquely Australian problem or perspective. Governments throughout world have recognised that the post 1945 security architecture is in need of repair, at the national as well as international level. In our own region, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and Taiwan have all established national security coordinating bodies while the US national security strategy could usefully inform our thinking about an Australian equivalent.

A brief glance at the table of contents of the Bush Administration's 2002 national security strategy is illuminating. It declares, as its goal, championing aspirations for human dignity; strengthening alliances to defeat global terrorism; working with others to defuse regional conflicts; preventing enemies from threatening the US with weapons of mass destruction; igniting a new era of global economic growth; building the infrastructure of democracy; and transforming America's national security institutions.²

If one substitutes Australia for the US, these goals could easily be a declaration of our own security objectives.

It is useful to recall that grand strategy was once intimately associated with planning and fighting wars even if today it has a much broader connotation. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau is reputed to have said that war is much too serious to leave to the generals. But it is also too serious to leave to the politicians and defence bureaucrats

Grand strategy ought to be the product of our best military, bureaucratic and political minds, supplemented by input from universities, think tanks, public commentators and intellectuals engaged in a mutually beneficial dialectic. As Henry Kissinger observed nearly half a century ago, a separation of strategy and policy can only be achieved to the detriment of both.³

If the ends of Australian grand strategy are to advance the national interest and protect our values, people, sovereignty and way of life then what role should the Australian Defence Force (ADF) play in this great enterprise and how should it go about its business?

In the past the ADF has been seen as the primary guarantor of the nation's security and an organisation dedicated to fighting and winning wars. By security I mean defence against military attack from a hostile power, and by war I mean conventional conflicts of the kind played out across the battlefields of Europe, Asia and the Middle East for most of the 20th century.

But these assumptions should no longer inform our thinking about the ADF's utility and future challenges. While defending the country against conventional military attacks should remain a core task it must be balanced against the likelihood and consequences of such an attack, as well as other priorities. They include combating transnational threats such as terrorism, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, piracy and the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

The ADF must also prepare for peace keeping missions, humanitarian deployments, protecting Australians overseas and military interventions, whether under the flag of the United Nations or in cooperation with friends and allies.

It is folly to assume, as some do, that ADF will only be pitted against the armed forces of another state, organised, equipped and trained to fight conventional wars. Such wars are increasingly unlikely. The reality is that the great bulk of those recorded since 1989 have been internal, a trend that has intensified in recent years.

Australia's own experience is illustrative. The ADF has repeatedly been deployed on international peace keeping and peace enforcement missions that bear little resemblance to the kinds of wars anticipated or deemed worthy of serious consideration by a generation of Australian defence planners.

Organised violence is no longer the exclusive preserve of states. Some non-state actors have at their disposal resources and influence that may equal, or even exceed, those of small states. Many are neither benign nor reluctant to use force, as terrorist and insurgent groups with international reach continue to demonstrate in Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Threats to security are more diffuse and amorphous; other actors are challenging the primacy of the state; and the triumph of liberal democracy over communism and fascism may be seen in retrospect as part of a longer epochal war between liberalism and its adversaries.

Increasingly, the contest is between those who support cosmopolitan, inclusive societies based on tolerance and freedom of expression, and those who favour particularist and exclusive identities that are characteristic of closed societies. 9/11 was not so much a cause of the world changing but a dramatic illustration of how much it has changed since 1989.

We need to recognise that because conflicts and threats originate far from our shores they should not be regarded as peripheral to our interests or requiring no capacity for intervention by the ADF. Equating proximity with importance in today's global village is a strategic misjudgement of breathtaking proportions.

Advocates of the proposition that our defence forces should be structured primarily for homeland defence, or regional conflicts, fail to understand that we must be capable of fighting well beyond our immediate neighbourhood, as well as at home and regionally. These are not either/or propositions.

If the government of the day wants to despatch a force to Africa, the Middle East or Northeast Asia it is entitled to know that the ADF can do so expeditiously, independently and without an unacceptable level of risk. Both Labor and Liberal governments have done so throughout our history and they will do so again.

Despite allegations to the contrary, there is little real difference in the structure of a force configured for distant as opposed to neighbourhood operations, nor need there be much difference in cost.

If you want to deploy a battalion with its supporting equipment to East Timor, for example, the ships needed to do so could take the same force to Iraq. It will just take a little longer. But the capability is essentially the same. The two threshold decisions are whether you go offshore and what you want the force to do.

Beyond these questions, the distance of the conflict has very little impact on the structure, capability or cost of the force. Those who argue that an expeditionary capability is unnecessary and detrimental to our regional capabilities have got this completely wrong. Geographical determinism is no substitute for sensible strategy.

We need to think about the real issues confronting the defence force and not revisit the sterile debates of the past. Regionalism versus globalism is about as useful an encapsulation of this country's policy options as forward defence versus continental defence, or self reliance versus dependence on great and powerful friends.

One other consequence of living in a global village is that coalition operations, with like minded states must remain a fundamental part of our grand strategy. With their limited resources and strategic reach, middle powers have little scope or capacity to shape global affairs operating alone. But in concert with others, Australia can be a much more effective force for good.

This truism applies regardless of the theatre of operations.

The media has a central role to play in shedding light on defence and strategic issues because of the arcane nature of much defence activity, its intrinsic importance and the secrecy which inevitably shrouds matters of national security. While we are blessed with some perspicacious and thoughtful journalists, too much of the media commentary on defence dwells on force structure and procurement issues.

Reams of column space are devoted to discussing the merits of tanks, fighter aircraft and destroyers but relatively little attention is given to the ADF's preparedness, training, doctrine, strategy, and leadership. It is important to understand that defence capability is as much a function of these factors as the ADF's structure and equipment.

The critical ingredient, of course, is money. 1.9 percent of gross domestic product or nearly \$17 billion buys a great deal of capability but not enough to optimally accomplish the increasingly complex and demanding tasks being asked of the defence force in a period of unprecedented activity.

Some commentators have talked about a coming train wreck and point to a rising structural deficit that may soon exceed \$1 billion annually if more money is not forthcoming. This is not withstanding the additional money the government allocated to defence in the 2000 White Paper equating to a three percent real increase in funding for ten years.

I share these concerns about defence's long term budgetary situation. The gap between strategic ambition and capability is now so wide that it is patently unsustainable without a substantial injection of funds or a reordering of priorities. Since additional funding is unlikely

– and I note that the Leader of the Opposition takes the view that a Labor government would not increase defence funding above 1.9 percent of GDP – then the alternative is to cut programs.

The only program cuts that could get Defence back into the black are of what I call the big two – the Joint Strike Fighter and the Air Warfare Destroyer. 100 JSFs will cost around \$16 bn, about 40 percent of the money earmarked for all significant defence projects during the ten year life of the current capability plan. Three AWDs are expected to cost around \$6 bn. Paring back the number of JSF's or rethinking the AWDs could fund most, if not all the shortfall in our capability requirements.

Thus, some time soon an Australian government will face the unpalatable choice of spending more or cutting capability, a choice that must be made if the ends of grand strategy are to be matched by our very finite means.

It is time for Australia to articulate a strategy for managing the challenges of this century. What is required is a comprehensive statement of national security priorities and objectives measured against resources and set against the realities of today's security environment.

On an increasingly crowded stage the ADF remains a principal actor and instrument of security policy, but its tasks should be more clearly defined and resources better allocated by locating defence within a broader national security framework.

It is abundantly clear that the ADF can no longer be configured solely for state on state conflicts or in defence of the continent and immediate neighbourhood because of the compression of time and space that is the defining characteristic of a globalised world. Our military forces must be versatile, smart, deployable over long distances and capable of protecting and sustaining themselves against all enemies, including the shadowy foes who will inhabit the urban battlefields of tomorrow.

Most of all they must be able to win the peace as well as the war. To take victory in war as the object of grand strategy is, as the British historian Liddell Hart proclaimed, “no more than a state of lunacy”.⁴ Grand strategy must aim to create alternatives to war.

There ought to be a wider and sustained debate about Australia's future sources of power and influence and an examination of the elements of national power, how we should wield it and to what purpose.

And we need to seriously consider the prospect that Australia may well be a declining power in the sense that the resources, technology, money and human skills that have given us an historical edge in the region are eroding assets.

Inertia and indifference are not the default positions of our politicians. Provided they are persuaded intellectually, governments will respond to good ideas by reallocating resources and adjusting priorities. It is incumbent on the strategic studies community to help Australia's political leaders better understand the nature of conflict in the 21st century and to decide for which wars the ADF should prepare.

In the light of the rising cost of health care and social security there seems little likelihood that future governments will allocate more resources to defence short of a cataclysmic or transformational event. The logical inference is that the widening gap between strategic ambition and defence capability can only be addressed by substantial cuts to existing programs.

The inescapable conclusion is that Australians are not good at long term strategy. Our thinking has tended to be too sectoral and siloed. We haven't yet come to terms with Australia's project in the world or identified the central organising principle of national security, if indeed there is one in a world of heterogenous threats and challenges. Perhaps it is the case that threat based scenarios need to give way to vulnerability planning, which means building redundancy and resilience into our legal, medical, informational and infrastructural systems to guard against unconventional as well as conventional foes.

Strategic thinking in this country has been historically under-resourced and unrewarded. Think tanks, universities and public commentators have an important role in helping busy policy makers and practitioners to think more systematically, coherently and imaginatively about our strategic choices.

¹ Christopher Layne, 'Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Hegemony or Balance of Power in the Twenty-first Century?' *World Policy Journal*, Summer 1998, p.8.

² Table of Contents, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002

³ Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p.422.

⁴ Basil Liddell Hart, *Deterrent or Defence*, (London: Stevens, 1960), p.66.

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