

***A CENTURY OF SERVICE:
100 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY***

***FROM DEAKIN TO DIBB: THE ARMY AND THE MAKING OF
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY***

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On 30 June 1911 Colonel James Whiteside McCay, Director of Intelligence in the Citizen Military Force (CMF) and a former Minister for Defence in the 1904-5 Reid-McClean Government, delivered an important address to the Victorian United Services Institute in Melbourne on the subject of 'The True Principles of Australian Defence'.¹ In the years between Federation in 1901 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Colonel McCay was regarded as a leading military expert and one of Australia's best-educated citizen soldiers. This high standing was reflected by his later service in World War I as Inspector-General of the First Australian Imperial Force (1st AIF) and as commander of the First Infantry Brigade at Gallipoli and of the Fifth Division on the Western Front.²

McCay's 1911 United Services address represents one of the best expositions of the enduring dilemmas successive generations of Australian strategists have faced since Federation. He identified two major philosophical problems that were beginning to develop in the strategic thought of the ten-year old Australian Commonwealth. The first problem was the growing schism between defence for local and national needs and defence for overseas and Imperial needs. A second and a related issue, was the tendency of many Australians to view the Royal Navy as the nation's front line force while relegating land forces to a passive role of territorial defence. 'The picture in the mind's eye of the public', lamented McCay, 'is [of] one huge ditch around the Australian coast with soldiers in khaki at regular intervals peering over its edge, and gripping rifles with tense hands'.³

McCay compared the desire to prepare only for local territorial defence to that of a man who designs his house to protect against solitary burglars while refusing to participate in measures to secure his neighbourhood against the depredations of organised brigands.⁴ He warned his United Services audience against trying to develop land forces only to defend the vast expanse of Australian territory. For McCay, the capacity to defend Australian interests anywhere rather than Australian territory everywhere was the key to the proper use of land forces. As he put it:

Our field army must be in the highest degree mobile, ready to concentrate anywhere, march anywhere and fight anywhere—not everywhere ... It is better to invade than be invaded; better to carry the war into the enemy's country than to wait for the war to come to you; better to attack than defend, and better to go to the firing line than to be a reserve which waits for the enemy's firing line to come to it.⁵

The issues outlined by Colonel McCay in 1911—local versus overseas defence; naval defence versus military defence and whether Australia should have an army designed to protect Australian territory everywhere or a force capable of upholding Australian interests anywhere—were to dominate the twentieth century. They are still present today—as even a cursory glance at the recent White Paper, *Defence 2000*, will reveal.⁶ The language of Australian strategy may change; particulars may differ; protagonists may come and go; but the essence of the defence debate remains unchanged. The dichotomy between local and overseas defence, between everywhere and anywhere has been perhaps the key factor in shaping the historical character and strategic outlook of the Australian Army in the century since Federation. To extend McCay's metaphor: in peacetime there has been a constant tendency to view the Army as a local constabulary designed to deal with random burglars rather than as an expeditionary force designed to meet organised brigands overseas.

Yet in pursuing the objective of an army designed largely for national territorial defence, Australian strategists have often been trapped between the contending forces of strategic theory and strategic reality. The peacetime defence programs whose intellectual foundations are associated with Alfred Deakin in the first decade of Federation and with Paul Dibb during the last decade and a half of the twentieth century are cases in point. In both instances, defence schemes that sought to focus the Army on local geographic defence were abandoned because the pressure of international events proved to be more important to the nation than the protection offered from an immutable strategic geography.

In the century framed at beginning and end by the ideas associated with the names of Deakin and Dibb, Australian peacetime strategy sought to emphasise the primacy of naval and later, sea-air forces, over land forces only to find that, in time of war or security crisis, the need has been mainly for soldiers. This was true of the World Wars, of Korea and Vietnam, of Malaya and Konfrontasi, of Somalia and, more recently, of East Timor. Because Australian strategic theory in peace has usually failed to anticipate the reality of military crisis, the Army has often been unprepared, underfunded and undermanned for operations in the field. It is, then, this striking paradox between irrelevance and neglect in peacetime defence policy and frenetic importance in times of military crisis that lies at the heart of the Australian Army's history in the twentieth century.

This essay seeks to provide a thematic overview of the place of the Army in the making of Australian strategy over the past century. Four areas are addressed. First, the ambiguous place of the Army in Australian strategic thinking in the era of Empire from Federation in 1901 to the outbreak of World War II in 1939 is examined. It is argued that that for much of the first half of the twentieth century there was a striking paradox between the theory of Australia's peacetime strategic planning and the reality of its wartime practice. In the Empire era, Australia neglected its peacetime land forces in favour of naval forces only to find that, in both world wars, it was soldiers rather than sailors that proved to be the dominant instrument of national strategy.

Second, the firm relationship between Australian strategy and the use of land forces as reflected by the development of a Regular Army in the first half of the Cold War is explored. The two decades between commitment in Korea in 1950 and military withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972—sometimes derided as the Forward Defence era— represent the only time in the twentieth century outside of the world wars when Australia's strategy, threat perception and the role of the Army reached a situation of approximate equilibrium. Third, a snapshot of the long and difficult Defence of Australia era from 1972-97 is provided. During this period, the Army's role in Australian strategy declined to a level not seen since the grim days of the 1930s. Fourth, the contours and future implications of the Army's post-1997 resurgence in Australian strategy are outlined and analysed.

The Army and Australian Strategy in the Era of Empire, 1901-39

The first decade of Federation confronted Australia with the enduring problem of reconciling national self-defence with Imperial strategic commitment. In 1907 Alfred Deakin could voice his belief in the need for a national defence effort 'of the people, for the people and by the people'.⁷ But in practice, as Deakin and other Federation politicians such as Andrew Fisher and Joseph Cook soon came to realise, a self-reliant defence policy was insufficient. Self-reliance was simply no guarantee of Australian security against the rise of a great power like Japan. Deakin and his successors therefore sought a solution through creating a balance between the demands of national and imperial defence.⁸ In May 1906 the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) advised Deakin: 'it is evident that so long as British naval strength is calculated and maintained ... attacks upon the Australian littoral against which land defence is required will be limited to raids hastily carried out by single vessels or small squadrons which have temporarily evaded our Naval Forces'.⁹

By 1911 Australia had largely adopted this appreciation as the basis of its strategic thinking and it was an approach that was to last until 1939. Australia undertook a commitment to assist British imperial naval power by creating a Royal Australian Navy (RAN) . For its part, an

Australian Army based on a large citizen militia force (CMF) and a small permanent force would ensure local territorial defence—mainly viewed as repelling raids and defending garrisons and coastal defences. Since the 1903 *Defence Act* restricted military service to Australian soil, the capacity to field an expeditionary force for overseas service was dependent first, on the outbreak of an actual crisis, and second, on the recruitment of volunteers.¹⁰ It was then, this curious blend of external navalism and internal military self-reliance that characterised Australian strategy in the era of Empire from 1901-39.

Few in the Army's Permanent Force during the Federation era contested the importance that Deakin attached to blue-water sea power. Australia was, after all, an island continent. Nonetheless, some of the leading soldiers of the day such as Major General Sir Edward Hutton and the future generals W.T. Bridges and C.B. Brudenell White questioned the passive strategic role afforded to the Army. Hutton was the main intellectual architect of the Army's claim to a broader and more significant role in Australian strategy. He was not deterred by the emphasis in Australian strategy on naval power. As he noted in his famous April 1902 Minute upon the Defence of Australia, it was precisely because Australia was an island-nation that her land forces could not be confined to a 'purely passive' territorial strategy.¹¹ Australia had to be prepared to defend not simply her own landmass but also 'the vast interests beyond her shores upon the maintenance of which her present existence and her future prosperity must so largely depend'.¹² In short, Hutton believed that Australia's maritime interests and her cultural affinity with the core values of Western civilisation would always mean that her soldiers would have to fight overseas for causes that transcended local geography.

Hutton was right. For all the emphasis on sea power in Australian strategy and defence policy from 1901-14, Australia's naval contribution was of marginal importance during the First World War. In contrast the 1st AIF on the Western Front played a central role in the vital battles of 1918.¹³ When Prime Minister Billy Hughes went to Versailles in 1919 to represent Australia he went as 'the little Digger' who justified his seat at the peace conference with the famous words. "I represent 60,000 dead".¹⁴ It was the first, and perhaps most graphic example, of peacetime strategic theory failing to match wartime reality.

The preeminent role played by the Army between 1915-18 was not reflected in Australian strategy during the inter-war years. As it had done before World War I, Australia quickly reverted to the primacy of naval defence—this time in the form of the Singapore strategy.¹⁵ The Army's official position on inter-war Australian defence strategy was formulated as early as February 1920 in the Report on the Military Defence of Australia drawn up by a Conference of Senior Officers chaired by Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel.¹⁶ The 1920 Chauvel Report identified Japan as Australia's 'only potential and probable enemy' and sought to provide a land force of 180,000 troops based on seven infantry and cavalry divisions to meet a possible Japanese invasion.¹⁷ In August 1928 a Defence Committee appreciation reaffirmed the main thrust of the Army's argument in the 1920 Report. The appreciation stated that Japan could embark and maintain three army divisions and thus 'invasion of Australia, but only on a limited scale, is within the bounds of possibility and not so improbable as to allow it being definitely ruled out'.¹⁸

However, any opportunity that the Army might have had to implement counterinvasion strategy was dispelled by the combined impact of Washington disarmament conference of 1922; the adoption of the Singapore strategy in 1923; and by the coming of the Great Depression in 1929. These three events reinforced Australia's preference for seeking security under the umbrella of the Royal Navy. Between 1929-32, the Army was in cut to the bone; compulsory service was suspended and militia strength dropped from over 46,000 in February 1929 to less than 26,000 by early 1930.¹⁹ In April 1930, Chauvel was moved to warn the Defence Committee that a possible Japanese invasion represented 'a vital danger' to Australia against which adequate land forces and shorebased air forces needed to be maintained.²⁰ However, the Chief of the Naval Staff, Rear Admiral W. Munro Kerr, remained 'strongly of the opinion that the naval strength of the Empire is a sufficient insurance against invasion'.²¹

In the Depression conditions of the 1930s, the corollary of a navalist approach to defence became the official abandonment of anti-invasion strategic planning on land. In 1932, and echoing the 1906 recommendation of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the Lyons Government decided 'that it would be better to provide efficient protection against raids rather than inefficient measures against invasion'.²² Counter-invasion planning was reduced to theoretical attention in staff-militia exercises and by 1938 the Australian Army was little more than a hollow shell, poorly manned and inadequately equipped.²³

The Chiefs of the General Staff for most of the 1930s, Major Generals Julius Bruce and John Lavarack, did not accept the straitjacket of fiscal decline and the raids strategy without protest. Bruce described planning for sporadic raids on land as 'definitely unsound and insupportable'; Lavarack never ceased to warn against the danger of Australia falling under the spell of navalist theory spun by 'wizards in Whitehall'.²⁴ While Director of Military Operations and Intelligence in March 1930, Lavarack expressed the Army's central objection to a navalist strategy when he wrote, 'the issue is simple. Command in the Atlantic is of vital importance to the British people, command in the Far East is not'.²⁵

A bitter Navy-Army clash over the ownership of strategy soon divided the Australian Chiefs of Staff—a clash exacerbated by the rising influence in the inter-war Department of Defence of Frederick Shedden. Australia's arch-advocate of blue-water navalism.²⁶ The Royal Australian Navy's attitude was summed up by the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sir George Hyde's April 1935 statement: 'a million trained men armed to the teeth, won't stop the Japanese fuelling their ships in a hundred inaccessible anchorages around our coast'.²⁷ The Army's approach to strategic policy was reflected in Lavarack's emphatic view that 'over-expenditure on the Naval forces is gradually throttling the Land forces, and is preventing the proper development of the Air forces'.²⁸

The Lyons Government adhered to Admiral Hyde's view and, under Lavarack's stormy tenure as Chief of the General Staff from 1935-39, attempts to shift political opinion in favour of a greater strategic role for the Army caused only civil-military acrimony. The outspoken views of senior officers such as Lavarack and Colonel Henry Wynter, the Director of Mobilisation, on what they viewed as Australia's unbalanced and unsound defence policy, cost the Army the confidence of many politicians in the Lyons Government.²⁹

Lavarack proved tenacious in pressing the Government for funds to create a stronger field force at the expense of fortifying coastal defences. His views were unwelcome because as Sir Archdale Parkhill, the Minister for Defence put it, they involved 'implications of a highly political nature'.³⁰ For his part, Wynter told the Melbourne United Services Institute in August 1935 that, reliance on the Singapore strategy amounted to asking Australians to 'immolate ourselves upon the lofty Imperial [defence] altar'.³¹ He went on to attribute the Army's lack of influence on Australian strategy to 'pundits ... mainly of the Blue Water school who, in a misplaced enthusiasm for their own arm, will not permit themselves to see any point which may detract from their fixed idea that the Navy is the be-all and the end-all of defence'.³²

Inevitably, the dissenting views of Lavarack and Wynter soon leaked into the public domain and were employed by both the press and by opposition members of parliament to embarrass the Lyons Government. When in November 1936, various anti-Singapore arguments—attributed by Parkhill as emanating from Army Headquarters—were used in parliament by John Curtin, the Leader of the Opposition, the Lyons Government took the opportunity to relieve Wynter of his duties.³³ Parkhill warned Lavarack and the Military Board that 'the Government will not tolerate propaganda by Service officers on the political aspect of Defence Policy'.³⁴ By the end of 1936 Parkhill seems to have become convinced that Lavarack's headquarters was infested, and possibly even controlled, by strategic schismatics whom Shedden called a 'radical "Young Turk" group' determined to try to change defence policy.³⁵

Shedden's view was exaggerated and self-serving. Nonetheless, it is true that the Army's approach to strategy during the inter-war years was characterised by professional polarisation from the RAN and by a general philosophical alienation from official defence policy. Denied a significant strategic role based on invasion, denuded of adequate resources and convinced,

as McCay had once put it, that 'the worst of raids would do infinitely less harm to our continent than the mildest of droughts', the Army was reduced to impotence and frustration.³⁶ In February 1920, Chauvel had echoed the views of both Hutton and McCay, when he wrote:

The advantages, moral and material, of fighting in the enemy's country are so enormous that it is folly to await the enemy's attack on our own soil ... The AIF had an opportunity to fight abroad and defend Australia so effectively that Australia hardly realised that it was defence and not offence, her troops had undertaken ... The community must, therefore make up its mind, however unwillingly, that all preparations for the defence of Australia, thorough and complete as they may be, may break down absolutely, if, at a final and decisive moment, the weapon of defence cannot be transferred beyond our territorial waters.³⁷

Yet the constraints of the 1903 *Defence Act* and the bitter legacy of the 1916-17 conscription debates reduced planning for expeditionary warfare to a purely theoretical exercise in peacetime. Nonetheless, when World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, it was an expeditionary plan. Plan 401—originally drawn up in 1922 during the Chanak crisis—which provided the basis for raising the 2nd AIF.³⁸

Ultimately, for all the inter-war controversy over navalism versus territorial defence, in World War II as in World War I, it was once again a volunteer infantry force that came to represent a main focus of the Australian war effort. Furthermore, when the Pacific War with Japan broke out in December 1941, it was not, as might have been expected the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Guy Rolfe, who played the decisive advisory role in the desperate weeks of crisis between Pearl Harbor and the fall of Singapore. It was instead the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee, who had to make sense of the immediate wreckage caused by two decades of inadequate and misguided defence strategy.³⁹

Between December 1941 and March 1942—that is prior to the forming of the Allied military leadership team in the South West Pacific of General Douglas MacArthur and Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey—Sturdee assumed the role of de facto Australian commander-in-chief and principal advisor to the Curtin Government. His advice proved critical to the resolution of such vital strategic issues as the deployment of troops in the northern islands and the return of the 1st Australian Corps to Australia.⁴⁰ In World War II it was once again Australia's land warfare effort, in the form of the provision of some 25 per cent of all Allied troops in the South-West Pacific, that proved to be the most decisive aspect of the nation's contribution to victory in the Pacific.⁴¹ In 1945 as in 1918, Australian pre-war strategic theory bore little relationship to the reality of wartime conditions.

The Army and the Reorientation of Australian Strategy, 1945-72

Between the late 1940s and the early 1960s there was a philosophical reorientation in Australian defence strategy away from Empire and British Commonwealth security concerns centred on the Middle East towards the United States and a preoccupation with South-East Asian security. The development of an Australian Regular Army (ARA) that could help uphold Australian interests was at the centre of this strategic reorientation.⁴²

Unlike the era of Empire, when the citizen militia dominated the peacetime Army, a standing regular army became essential to allow Australia to meet the different strategic challenges of limited war and insurgency in the Cold War. The enemy was no longer the Japanese samurai moving by sea but the Communist insurgent moving on land—an opponent who could best be countered by deploying specialised ground forces. As Sir Philip McBride, the Minister for Defence, put it in February 1952, the new emphasis in Australian strategy on regular troops who could defend vital Australian interests anywhere, represented 'a radical departure from traditional Army policy'.⁴³

Indeed, the development of the Regular Army throughout the 1950s signified a major change in Australia's conception of the use of land forces in national strategy. For the first time during peacetime conditions, Australian strategy gave precedence not to a numerically large citizen militia but to the maintenance of a well-equipped, highly-trained and self-contained force-in-being for rapid deployment overseas. In short, a regular army became central to what Prime Minister Robert Menzies called a 'modern conception of Australian defence' in which professional soldiers would 'enlist as in other countries, for service anywhere, and not merely for service in Australia'.⁴⁴ The result was a transformation in the ability of Australian land forces to serve the nation's political-strategic ends. In the twenty years from Korea to Vietnam, the Regular Army became a major component of Australian statecraft. Under the doctrine of forward defence, Australia's interests were considered to require the 'close co-ordination of political, economic and military activities'.⁴⁵ In particular, diplomacy and strategy were fused together to provide a framework of security in which the aim was to keep military operations away from Australia's shores.⁴⁶ The Army undertook continuous campaigning in Asia, in operations that perhaps came closest to fulfilling the Hutton-McCay vision of Australia using her land forces to defend its interests anywhere they were threatened.

The strategic rationale for the Regular Army owed much to the post-World War II leadership and influence of two Chiefs, Lieutenant Generals Sir Vernon Sturdee and Sir Sydney Rowell. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, both men were determined to try to integrate the Army's peacetime preparation with realistic threat perception and so avoid the strategic irrelevance of land forces that had marked the 1920s and 1930s. They believed that modern warfare made local defence, strategic isolation and, above all, long mobilisation time virtually obsolete notions.⁴⁷

Sturdee played a key part in drawing up the important February 1946 Chiefs of Staff Appreciation of the Strategical Position of Australia which recommended mobile, well-equipped land forces designed for overseas or coalition operations rather than local or continental defence.⁴⁸ In their Appreciation, the Chiefs of Staff described the latter as a strategy of 'last resort' and declared 'the concept of strategical isolation is irreconcilable with the realities of modern war'.⁴⁹ In March 1946, Rowell as Vice Chief of the General Staff, warned against developing a post-war Army based on the traditional Australian notion of basing peacetime land defence on militia forces. He stated:

The peacetime army organisation of 1939 and earlier years affords no real basis for consideration of what is needed today. It was based on a conception of local defence against raids on, or invasion of, our country and carried no commitment, expressed or implied, in a wider strategical sphere. Even for limited outlook, it was woefully inadequate for its primary tasks as events were subsequently to prove.⁵⁰

Despite being frequently hampered by fiscal restraints and political ambivalence, Sturdee and Rowell never ceased to argue that peacetime land forces had to include regular and readily deployable units directly related to the commitments Australia might be expected to meet in a military crisis.⁵¹

Although the framework for the Australian Regular Army was laid down by the Chifley Labor Government in June 1947, its character and role was largely moulded by the strategic policy of the Menzies' Coalition Government during its long tenure in office from 1949-66. After the mid-1950s, Australia's strategic priorities shifted decisively from preparations for conventional war in the Middle East to limited war and counter-revolutionary operations in South-East Asia. As a result, the Army often became the most significant form of usable Australian military power to support collective defence commitments under the Australia, New Zealand, Malaya (ANZAM), Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) and South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) treaties.⁵² By 1957, the emphasis in defence policy was on the development of 'hard-hitting, mobile and readily available forces' to meet a range of South-East Asian security contingencies.⁵³

Between 1957 and 1959, the development of a modern land force received close attention in the Menzies Government. In February 1957, the cabinet gave 'absolute priority' to the creation of an Army force-in-being consisting of an infantry battalion group and a new independent infantry brigade group.⁵⁴ As Ian McNeill has observed:

The [February 1957] decision was a milestone in the development of the standing army, reflecting Australia's new defence posture and strategic outlook. For the first time in peace, precedence would be given to the maintenance of a well-equipped, highly trained and self-contained force for rapid deployment overseas. The emphasis in defence planning [became] ... the maintenance of a force-in-being that could be sustained over a long period. Large manpower numbers gave way to modern equipment, mobility, and firepower.⁵⁵

By the mid-1960s, the Regular Army had not only supplanted the CMF in importance but had also weathered various organisational disruptions such as the impact of the 1950s national service scheme and the Pentropic experiment of the early 1960s.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as Australia's military commitment to South Vietnam escalated between 1962 and 1965, the Army consolidated its role as the predominant instrument of Australian strategy. In 1972 when the battle-hardened Australian Army emerged from the Vietnam War it was 45,000 strong and unrecognisable as an organisation descended from the minuscule Permanent Forces of the Empire era. In 1976, the American commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, described an expert Australian task force led by 'a succession of able administrators ... and gifted field commanders'.⁵⁷ He went on to write:

Aside from American soldiers, the Australians were the most thoroughly professional foreign force serving in Vietnam. Small in numbers and well trained, particularly in anti-guerrilla warfare, the Australian Army was much like the post-Versailles German Army in which even men in the ranks might have been leaders in some less capable force.⁵⁸

The Army and Strategy During the Defence of Australia Era, 1972-97

In the quarter of a century after withdrawal from Vietnam, under both Coalition and Labor governments, Australian strategy was dominated by the geographical theory of Defence of Australia. Between 1972 and 1997 Defence of Australia strategy elevated naval and air forces to primacy and, in terms of expenditure and strategic influence, reduced the Army to the least significant of the three services. By the early 1990s, the Australian Army was committed to a single strategic scenario: the territorial defence of northern Australia. As a result, the Army came to look less like Westmoreland's antipodean Reichswehr and more like a smaller version of the 1930s French Army deployed behind a coastal version of the Maginot Line stretching from Cairns to Carnarvon.

A trend in Australian thinking towards giving more emphasis to what the Defence Committee termed 'the continuing fundamental obligation of continental defence' first emerged during the early 1970s.⁵⁹ By 1976 the Fraser Government's Defence White Paper had begun the complicated process of developing a new policy of self-reliance based on a form of continental defence.⁶⁰ However, the conceptual approach that came to underpin the notion of a geographical defence of Australia was not fully refined or properly formalised until the mid-1980s. In 1986, a form of self-reliant geographical determinism as codified by Paul Dibb in his seminal *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, became the philosophical basis for official Australian strategic thinking for over a decade.⁶¹

Dibb laid down the intellectual parameters for Defence of Australia when he wrote that he had consciously sought 'to narrow the [strategic] options [for Australian strategy] ... by focusing on the unchanging nature of our geographic circumstances and the levels of threat we might realistically expect'.⁶² The Hawke-Keating Government's White Papers in 1987 and 1994 reflected Dibb's philosophy. Both documents used the unchanging nature of Australia's strategic geography as a conceptual device to align strategy with force structure, capability development and defence expenditure.⁶³

Three features of the Defence of Australia strategy impacted adversely upon the Army between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. First, its geographical determinism resulted, like the Singapore strategy before it, in returning the Army to the cul-de-sac of continental defence. Second, the anti-raid philosophy of the Empire era was revived—this time under Defence of Australia's modern guise of a layered defence-in-depth. Since the Navy and Air Force comprised the front-line defence layers in Australia's maritime approaches, the only credible contingencies facing the Army were declared to be low-level operations or short-warning conflicts on Australian soil. In July 1986 in a minute that could have easily have been penned by the Military Board in 1936, the Chief of the General Staff's Advisory Committee (CGSAC) noted, 'the priority demands on our ground forces are for the protection of military and infrastructure assets ... in the north of Australia from a protracted campaign of dispersed raids'.⁶⁴

Third, by designating the maritime approaches as a sea-air gap, the architects of Defence of Australia succeeded in their declared aim of narrowing Australia's strategic options. The notion of a sea-air gap affected the role of the Army because it removed any necessity to create a more comprehensive and balanced strategy based on the reality that the maritime approaches embrace two northern archipelagos and represent a sea-air-land gap. The fact that the experience of World War II had shown that Australian operations in the northern approaches required a joint maritime strategy with a proactive role for land forces never appeared to be seriously countenanced in strategic guidance between 1987 and 1997.⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, against this strategic background, the Army's intellectual influence in the official defence debate appeared to decline. Successive Army Chiefs from General Sir Frank Hassett in the 1970s to Lieutenant General John Sanderson in the 1990s, found most of their energies absorbed less by the nuances of strategy and more by the enormous challenge of having to restructure land force organisation and doctrine for continental defence.⁶⁶ An Army optimised for tropical warfare in South East Asia was, over two decades, transformed into a force designed for dispersed low-level operations in northern Australian conditions. This transformation was not made any easier by having to be accomplished against an ever-shrinking Army resource base—as symbolised by the decline in Regular Army strength from 29,000 in the late 1970s to less than 24,000 in the late 1990s.⁶⁷

The various concepts adopted by Army Headquarters to prepare it for a role in a continental defence strategy reached their climax with the 1995 Army in the 21st Century (A21) Review and the 1997 Restructuring of the Army (RTA) scheme. Both of these initiatives were aimed at reconciling the needs of rapid deployment with those of combat power in wide-area concurrent operations across northern Australia.⁶⁸ Yet at the very time the Army was finalising its force structure to meet the geo-strategic complexities of Defence of Australia, the changing security environment of the 1990s suggested that such a single-scenario strategy had ceased to have credibility under post-Cold War conditions.

The Post-Dibb Era: The Army and Strategy Since 1997

Between 1997 and 2000, four factors transformed the place of the Army in Australian strategy. The first factor was the publication of the Howard Government's Australia's Strategic Policy (ASP 97) in December 1997; the second factor was the operational impact of the East Timor security crisis of September 1999; third, there was the release in August 2000 report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) into the Army entitled *From Phantom to Force*.⁶⁹ The fourth and final factor was the publication of the new Defence White Paper in December 2000.

The first factor, that of the publication of ASP 97, introduced a new emphasis in Australian strategy on preparedness and required the Army to be able to conduct offshore regional operations, either unilaterally or as part of a coalition.⁷⁰ This new strategic posture effectively rendered much of the Army's A21-RTA scheme for operations on Australian soil obsolete. In October 1998, the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Frank Hickling responded by calling upon the Army to seize the moment with what he called a 'reassertion of Army's intellectual leadership of defence processes'.⁷¹ In 1999 General Hickling declared the A21-RTA scheme

to be a 'passive, defensive strategy' imposed on the Army by a system of strategic guidance that viewed land defence from the perspective of what he described as 'a blue-water Maginot Line theory'.⁷² The Chief of Army formally replaced the A21-RTA program with a maritime strategy aimed at producing 'highly deployable, potent, medium-weight land forces for the conduct of manoeuvre operations in the littoral environment'.⁷³

The second factor in the transformation of the Army's place in Australian strategy was the crisis in East Timor. Stabilising East Timor involved the largest single deployment by Australian forces since 1945 and led in November 1999 to a much needed increase of 3000 troops for the Army.⁷⁴ The Army's central role in East Timor again highlighted the striking contrast between the low priority of the land force in peacetime Australian defence strategy in comparison to its actual role in time of military crisis. East Timor drove home the reality that of the 22 operations undertaken by the Australian Defence Force in the decade since the end of the Cold War, land forces have predominated in 20 of them.⁷⁵ In June 2000 in the wake of East Timor Hugh White, the Deputy Secretary for Strategy in the Department of Defence, reflected ruefully on the paradox between theory and practice in Australian strategic thinking with respect to the Army:

For a long time, Army strove ... to reshape itself around a very particular operational scenario [low-level contingencies in Defence of Australia] ... but I think historians will judge that, at about the time when restructuring the Army, building on the Army 21 study, had brought to a new state of perfection our planning for that particular scenario, we started realising that the Army might need to do some other things, like occasionally to deploy offshore to undertake operations like the ones we undertook in East Timor.⁷⁶

White went on to imply that, although international strategic circumstances had changed, contemporary Australian policy-makers had yet to come to terms with the need for a more pro-active, offshore role for land forces.⁷⁷

The third factor that highlighted the need for the Army to be accorded greater priority in Australian strategy was the August 2000 Joint Standing Committee Report into the state of the land force entitled *From Phantom to Force*. This Report, perhaps the most significant written on the Army in over a quarter of a century, directed urgent political attention to the fate of the land force under the impact of Defence of Australia conditions. The Report described force development priorities in defence policy since 1987 as having 'bolted the Army to the territorial defence of Australia'.⁷⁸ This approach had driven the land force into the thankless process of continuous reorganisation without adequate resources. The result had been a systematic degrading of Army capabilities and almost perpetual force hollowness or phantom formations.⁷⁹

Noting that the Army's commitments were higher than at any time since the Vietnam War, the Report called for an end to Government neglect of the land force. In a *cri de coeur* rare for an official document, the Report stated, 'for the sake of the soldiers and for the defence of the nation, this approach must stop'.⁸⁰ The Joint Standing Committee warned that national and regional security issues were not mutually exclusive but synonymous since Australia could not be secure in an insecure region. Accordingly, the land force-in-being needed to consist of an independent brigade and a deployable battalion group—optimised for warfighting operations—in what the Report defined as Australia's Area of Critical Security Interest (ACSI) stretching from Fiji to the Cocos Islands.⁸¹

The fourth and most recent factor affecting the Army's strategic role has been the White Paper, *Defence 2000*. This ambitious document seeks to resolve the historic tension between a desire to limit force structure and expenditure to the self-reliant bedrock of Defence of Australia while simultaneously meeting a broadened security agenda beyond Australia's shores. While *Defence 2000* has not succeeded in resolving the dichotomy that General Hutton and Colonel McCay first recognised between protecting Australian territory and defending Australian interests—that is between 'everywhere and anywhere'—it has sought to create a more realistic balance of, and integration between, local and regional defence needs and between self-reliance and a maritime strategy.⁸²

At the centre of this rebalancing and reintegration of strategic priorities is the Army. In a key statement the White Paper admits, 'the development of our land forces needs to reflect a new balance between the demands of operations on Australian territory and the demands of deployments offshore, especially in our immediate neighbourhood'.⁸³ Accordingly the White Paper seeks to provide ready Frontline Forces composed of a brigade and a battalion group along with new equipment to the tune of 3.6 billion dollars.⁸⁴ Indeed, in terms of land forces—and despite a different historical context—*Defence 2000* is reminiscent of the 1957-59 Menzies defence program which, coincidentally, was also launched to deal with an upsurge of instability in the Asia-Pacific region. Like the late 1950s defence program before it, the 2000 White Paper's land force proposals seek to structure the Australian Regular Army to enable it to deploy a brigade group for extended periods while simultaneously maintaining at least a battalion group for operations elsewhere.⁸⁵

Moreover, *Defence 2000* confirms the decline of the 1986 Dobb doctrine of 'narrow strategic options' based on enduring strategic geography. Despite declaratory statements about the primacy of defending Australia's geography, the White Paper emphatically states:

Nothing can remove the element of the unexpected from our military affairs... So our defence planning should not leave us with a set of capabilities that is too narrowly focussed on specific scenarios. Our aim is to provide Australia with a set of capabilities that will be flexible enough to provide governments with a range of military options across a spectrum of credible situations.⁸⁶

The practical need for a range of military options helps explain the greater attention that the White Paper pays to improving both land capabilities and in explaining the nexus between defence planning and broader national security interests. Indeed, the relationship between defence policy and broader national interests—that include diplomatic and economic factors—is arguably more closely linked in *Defence 2000* than in any major security-planning document since the strategic basis papers of the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁸⁷ As the 2000 White Paper puts it, 'our armed forces need to be able to do more than simply defend our coastline. We have strategic interests and objectives at the global and regional levels. Australia is an outward looking country'.⁸⁸ In historical perspective, then, the White Paper's focus on reviving the role of the Army, on developing a more supple strategy of options and on ensuring closer linkage between defence and broader politico-strategic interests places it firmly in the mainstream of the Coalition's international relations philosophy.⁸⁹

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay it was suggested that the dichotomy between local and overseas defence, between Colonel McCay's 'everywhere and anywhere', has been a key factor in shaping the historical character and strategic outlook of the Australian Army in the century since Federation. In 1976, in perhaps an unconscious echo of McCay's 1911 ideas. Sir Arthur Tange, the Secretary for Defence, stated that the foundation of Australian security was primarily based on preserving 'two freedoms'—freedom of local territory from interference and freedom to pursue national and international policies without pressure or duress from a militarily superior power.⁹⁰ What is striking about Australian strategy over the last century, is the frequent inability of diverse governments to balance local and overseas needs. The main difficulty in balancing McCay's 'everywhere and the anywhere' and Tange's 'two freedoms' has been, in large measure, due to Australia's strange ambiguity about the place and role of land forces in its national strategy.

In April 1954, *The Times* of London wrote of Australia, 'no nation acquits itself so valiantly in war, no nation takes so little pains in peace-time'.⁹¹ Many of Australia's twentieth century strategic-decision makers have long laboured under an illusion that where the nation wants to fight can be determined during peacetime by simple designation of preferred force structures and by identification of predictable arenas of conflict. The most striking examples of this strategic determinism are the absolutist beliefs in the efficacy of naval defence from the Singapore base in the 1920s and 1930s and in the theory of naval-air defence of the sea-air gap in the 1980s and 1990s.

As a consequence of such convictions, Australian land forces have often suffered from long periods of neglect and unreadiness. From the time Alfred Deakin laid the foundations for a system of territorial defence in 1907 to Paul Dibb's codification in 1986 of a modern geo-strategy of continental defence, the Australian Army has faced the striking paradox that while peacetime planning has usually wanted to confine the digger to defend home soil, wartime and crisis have always seen him serving in a decisive role overseas. The result of this paradox was, that for the first half of the twentieth century, the Army's peacetime organisation was of minimal strategic value to the nation. In the second half of the twentieth century, Australia developed a Regular Army that could be employed more widely. Yet, with the exception of the 1950s and 1960s, peacetime defence strategy has consistently failed to anticipate the kind of conflict the Army might realistically expect to confront. Australian defence policy-makers, for reasons of finance, politics or ideology, have usually tended to favour a strategy based on the primacy of naval-air forces over a strategy of balanced, joint forces.

In the twenty-first century Australia must recognise that its historic reliance has never rested simply on the individual dash of the volunteer digger but also on institutional skills that can only be provided by a properly maintained professional Army. The challenge is for governments of all persuasions to recognise that the role of the Army can only be clear to the electorate if Australian strategy is based on a broad and balanced conception of national security interests. In September 1950, Prime Minister Robert Menzies warned Australians that, even in the age of 'push button war', the nation had to have an effective Army. In words that are as relevant in the high-technology information age of today as they were half a century ago, Menzies said: 'give up discounting the Army. To allow it to become the Cinderella of the Services is to be blind to stem realities and forgetful of a splendid Australian tradition. In modern war, men need science ... but science cannot win without men'.⁹²

Endnotes

1. Colonel The Honourable J.W. McCay, VD, Director of Intelligence, CMF, 'The True Principles of Australia's Defence', *Commonwealth Military Journal* (August 1911), 395-402. I am grateful to Major Russell Parkin, Research Fellow in the Land Warfare Studies Centre, for bringing this article to my attention.
2. McCay was knighted in 1918 and retired from the Army in 1926 with the rank of lieutenant general.
3. McCay, 'The True Principles of Australia's Defence', 400.
4. *Ibid*, 398.
5. *Ibid*, 401. McCay did not deny a role for the Army in local territorial defence. As he put it, land forces might have to fight 'at Cambridge Gulf as at Geelong' but his clear preference was for an Army 'best suited to help in the protection of the Empire as a whole': *ibid*, 400, 401-2.
6. Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, 2000), chs 3-6.
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16. Australian War Memorial (henceforth cited as AWM) 1, item 20/7. Report on the Military Defence of Australia, 6 February 1920.
17. Ibid.
18. National Archives of Australia (henceforth cited as AA), MP 1185/8, Item 1846/4/363. 'Appreciation: War in the Pacific, 9 August 1928', 3.
19. Grey, *The Australian Army*, 87.
20. AA MP 1185/8, Item 1846/4/363, 'Appreciation: War in the Pacific: Addendum (extract from the Minutes of the Defence Committee, 11 April 1930)', 1.
21. Ibid.
22. Horner, 'Australian Army Strategic Planning Between the Wars', 90.
23. Ibid, 89-91.
24. See AWM 113, Committee of Imperial Defence: Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee—The Defence of Australia, Item MH 1/43, 'Note by Chief of the General Staff, 5 August 1933'; Brett Lodge, *Lavarack: Rival General* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998). 41; 15.
25. Ibid, 21-2.
26. For Shedden's rising influence see Horner, *Defence Supremo*, ch 2.
27. Quoted in Lodge, *Lavarack*, 47.
28. Ibid, 45.
29. The best study of Australian civil-military relations in the 1930s is contained in Lodge, *Lavarack*, chs 3-6.
30. Ibid, 51.
31. Colonel H D Wynter, 'Defence of Australia & its Relation to Imperial Defence', speech to the United Services Institute, August 1935, reprinted in *Australian Army Journal* 319 (December 1975), 17-35.
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37. Report on the Military Defence of Australia, 6 February 1920, 29.
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83. *Ibid*, 79.
84. *Ibid*, 80-7.
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