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Preparing for the Indo-Pacific Century: Challenges for the Australian Army
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Check against delivery

The Honourable Alexander Downer AC, High Commissioner for Australia;

Doctor Karin von Hippel, Director-General, RUSI;

Major General Ben Bathurst, GOC London District;

Professor Malcolm Chalmers, Deputy DG & Research Director, RUSI;

Our chair this afternoon, Doctor Peter Roberts, Director Military Sciences, RUSI;

Distinguished guests;

RUSI members;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Good Afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at the Royal United Services Institute today. The Institute is not only the oldest defence and security think tank in the world; it has built an enviable reputation as a centre of constructive policy influence. I value the opportunity to contribute.

This afternoon I will speak about the Australian Army and the challenges of the so called 'Indo-Pacific Century'.

For all nations, a degree of geographic determinism plays a role in shaping the lens through which national security interests are pursued. For the United Kingdom, even as you 'leave' Europe under Brexit, there is a realisation that Europe isn't going anywhere. It will continue to loom large, both in imagination and reality. The simple logic of geography ensures that Europe's issues and challenges will remain of vital interest to the United Kingdom.

From Australia, the geographic view is markedly different: the term 'Indo-Pacific' usefully encompasses the key features of our geo-strategic setting. Our island continent lies at the fulcrum of the Indian and Pacific oceans and the Asian landmass those oceans border. The Indo-Pacific envelopes our immediate horizon across three cardinal points of the compass.

I invite you to consider the view if you could ride on a geostationary satellite above the red centre of our continent.

The hemisphere you see from high above Australia contains the most populous nation on Earth, the largest democratic nation on Earth and the nation with the largest Muslim majority population on Earth. Eight of the ten most populated sovereign states on the planet are Indo-Pacific nations. Over 50% percent of the world's population lives here. It contains 12 member states of the G20. The three largest economies in the world are Indo-Pacific nations. Highlighting the inherent diversity of the region, it also encompasses ten of the world's fourteen smallest economies, including some of the most climatically fragile. Linked to the volume of trade and economic activity, the busiest international sea

lanes are in the region, and nine of the world's ten busiest seaports; as well as most of the world's megacities of today and tomorrow.

The region is also heavily militarised. Seven of the world's ten largest standing militaries and five of the world's declared nuclear nations are in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific region matters to Australia because it is where we live. But an appreciation of the view outlined from our imaginary satellite suggests why the Indo-Pacific is globally important. Technical innovation in the cyber/digital and space domains is driving connectivity, with the potential to bring the region closer together or possibly splinter it into a thousand domains of perception, influence and action.

Australia's recent Foreign Policy White paper, released a fortnight ago, describes a tough, exciting and competitive landscape within the Indo-Pacific. It outlines five tasks ahead of us to ensure a prosperous Australian future:

- Secure Australian interests in the region,
- Take up opportunities in the global economy,
- Keep Australians safe, secure and free,
- Strengthen the international rules that make it all work; and
- Help our near neighbors and partners.

These tasks complement the extant direction of the 2016 Defence White Paper, which defines three equally weighted strategic defence interests for Australia:

- A secure, resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication,

- A secure nearer region, encompassing maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific, and
- A stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.

Of course, regional geography on a small blue planet is neither exclusive nor deterministic. Europe matters to Australia as the Indo-Pacific matters to the UK. History, culture, trade and people all flow between our nations and regions. Perhaps most importantly, so do the ideas and norms that have created the modern world: ideas now under sustained revisionist pressure.

The United Kingdom and Australia face what our Foreign Policy White Paper describes as a 'contested and competitive world'. The Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, opened the Foreign Policy White Paper with the line: '*Change, unprecedented in its scale and pace, is the tenor of our times*'. Such lines quickly draw the attention of defence leaders and planners alike: both of whom typically have an innate preference for continuity and stability! Our nations, and their armed forces, see the same issues in this 'contested and competitive world': challenges to the existing global order, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, the spread of violent extremist organisations, the mass movement of people and the security impacts of climate change.

Accompanying this widespread perception of relentless change is an equally widespread sense of detrimental impact to the national security interests of western liberal democracies. The US Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis, articulated this in June when he stated that he saw: '*...a more volatile security environment than any I have experienced during my four decades of military service*'.

In the Indo-Pacific, unilateral action in the South China Sea, and the proliferation and provocation by the DPRK, seriously challenge a rules based international order. As does events in the Ukraine, the Baltic States and the Crimea. Of perhaps greater concern is a willingness for action over dialogue in international dispute resolution and a growing critique of the liberal democratic model that has built our modern world.

Turning to the Australian Army in these uncertain times.

On appointment as Chief of Army, I set four priorities to focus Army's thinking, planning and action.

These were, and remain:

- Support to ADF joint operations: this is why our Army exists;
- Assist our wounded, injured and ill: to rebuild capability and respect our people's sacrifice;
- Modernise the force: to give our people the best opportunity to achieve their missions and come home safely; and
- Ongoing cultural reform and renewal: to ensure our Army reflects the highest expectations of the Nation we serve.

My priorities can be summarised as: people, readiness and modernisation.

Unsurprisingly, these tend to be the common preoccupation of Army Chiefs world-wide.

This year the Australian Army is in its 18th year of continuous operational activity; with commitments globally, regionally and at home. We have, and continue to serve alongside, the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in many other missions. The performance of our people, both Tommies and Diggers alike, on all these operations has been overwhelmingly impressive, We've learnt a lot and sought to reinvest that knowledge into building a better Army.

To that end, the Australian Army has recently completed *Plan Beersheba*, begun in 2011. The implementation of *Plan Beersheba* has redefined force generation 'business as usual' for our Army, through the following key outcomes:

- the standardisation of brigade structures to improve our ability to sustain operations;
- a force generation cycle that provides a framework to prioritise resources and training effort among combat brigades;
- the improved integration of our regular and reserve personnel in a total workforce model, which better allows all soldiers to contribute to operational capability; and
- the formation of a specialist amphibious infantry battalion as a component of a developing ADF amphibious capability.

In combination, these changes have allowed us to field a better trained, ready and agile force focused at brigade group operations within a divisional joint force setting.

In terms of modernisation through materiel acquisition programs, three priority projects have my constant attention: building a land combat digital network, upgrading protected manoeuvre and the soldier combat ensemble.

We are moving from an analogue Army to a digital-by-design force: secure, resilient and connected to joint and coalition partners. This is grindingly hard work. We've been at it for 15 years and I think it will take another 10 to create a 'whole of force' network effect: a quarter of a century - but an extraordinary step in capability. Protected manoeuvre, through replacement programs for reconnaissance and infantry fighting vehicles and upgrades to our armour, is the hard punch that only the Land Force can deliver. And the soldier combat ensemble greatly enhances the awareness, lethality and survivability of our people. Three iconic projects: but are they enough?

Working on our part of the tasks set by the Defence White Paper, and inferred by the Foreign Policy White Paper, in a very complex and dynamic region, I suggest the best capability we have remains our people. And I see three opportunities to assist them: *Engagement, Adaptation and Teaming with Technology*. I will address each of these in turn, but first some remarks about context.

Prime Minister Turnbull wrote in our Foreign Policy White Paper:

*More than ever, Australia must be sovereign, not reliant. We must take responsibility for our own security and prosperity while recognising we are stronger when sharing the burden of leadership with trusted partners and friends.*¹

What matters here is context. Things that work for other nations and armies, with different economic, demographic, industrial, geographic circumstance and political cultures will not necessarily work for Australia. We have a long history of embracing the latest idea, trend

¹ Australian Government (2017), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, p. iii.

or military concept from allies, partners and corporations, sometimes uncritically, without due consideration of its utility for our unique sovereign and strategic circumstance. An audience such as this may be familiar with many of these ideas. Amongst their number are the *'Pentropic Division'* of the early 1960s, *'The Revolution in Military Affairs'* of the 1980s, *'Effects Based Operations'*, *'Network Centric Warfare'* and the wordy *'Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment'*. We have even flirted with Chinese concepts of: *'Anti Access Area Denial'* or A2AD. Following on from the Prime Minister's thoughts, we need, as a part of Australia's joint force and operating within our 'Whole of Government' national security construct, an Australian Army that is 'fit for purpose' for our unique circumstances.

I speak of an Army not intellectually beholden to others, but rather benefiting from close collaboration and cooperation, on both ideas and actions, with allies and friends. Equally, an Army which will offer those allies and friends the benefits of insights to the challenges shared in the Indo-Pacific domain that are based on our thinking, experience and circumstances. A land force respected and understood by many, strengthened by our intellectual capacity, training, regional relationships and Australia's industrial and wider economic capabilities; an Army that operates as a core component of a relatively small, but nonetheless technically sophisticated, Australian joint force; and within an Australian 'Whole of Government' approach - what the United Kingdom's National Security and National Cyber Security Strategies have referred to as a 'comprehensive approach'.

To be that Army, we need to continue to build on our efforts in *Engagement, Adaptation* and *Teaming with Technology*. Let me explain.

Engagement

Following the Defence White Paper's lead, Army is focused on engagement with Australia's allies, regional partners, friends and cohabitants of the Indo-Pacific. Australian Army international engagement is at record levels. The Australian Army is first and foremost a 'people' force. We have a well-recognised and frequently demonstrated ability to develop and sustain deep and enduring personal and institutional habitual relationships within our region and further abroad. Through engaging internationally we enhance capability, sustain Australia's influence, generate security partnerships and build regional security resilience.

Engagement can help shape to avoid conflict through the development of shared understanding and resolve. If conflict arises it offers the opportunity to build upon familiar, established and habitual patterns of cooperation. Sun Tzu advises us to: *'figure out how to do things so that you get the maximum effect and the least bloodshed.'* And, sadly, should the blood flow, through engagement we are stronger together.

Adaptation

It is a truism that victory in war goes to the side that most effectively adapts to the actual war being fought and then continues to adapt to the opportunities and challenges that war presents. Sometimes this happens before the first shot is fired. It is self-evident that we must try and position ourselves to win the first, and subsequent cycles of the adaption contest. Coming second is a lonely place. The Defence White Paper 2016 noted the capability edge that Australia has long held within our region is being progressively and consistently eroded in the face of regional economic growth and commensurate increases in spending on military acquisition and technology within the Indo-Pacific.

Can our 'capability edge' be retained through the development and maintenance of an 'intellectual edge'? In 2016 our Army reviewed and commenced renewal of our entire approach to education, individual and collective training, doctrine development and publication. Last month I released an Army Professional Military Education (PME) Strategy to direct, resource and assess the work that remains in this vital aspect of capability. I have previously quoted the U.S. historian Williamson Murray to explain why I am serious about our intellectual edge. These words still ring true:

War is neither a science nor a craft, but rather an incredibly complex endeavour which challenges men and women to the core of their souls. It is, to put it bluntly, not only the most physically demanding of all the professions, but also the most demanding intellectually and morally. The cost of slovenly thinking at every level of war can translate into the deaths of innumerable men and women, most of whom deserve better from their leaders.

We simply cannot afford slovenly thinking. However, adaptation requires more than just smart people. It requires a permissive, supportive, culture of excellence and innovation. And in the 'culture versus strategy war', I'm an adherent to the view that culture eats strategy for breakfast, every time. I want to see an Australian Army culture evolve as one welcoming of adaptation and adaptive behaviour, as an institutional norm not a bumper sticker.

Of course we achieve adaptive change in our systems, processes and organisations through evolution and innovation, and the interplay between them. Evolution sees

gradual, incremental changes, building on improvements from what has gone before or currently exists. Innovation sees adaptation occur through embrace of radical step change. A recent online article on the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's blog succinctly explained the opportunity offered:

Why focus on innovation?...a small country trying to equip, deploy and sustain a small, high-tech defence force won't derive either an operational advantage or an economic advantage from trying to do the same thing as everybody else, only cheaper. Innovation – in equipment, organisation and process – is the difference between being ordinary, vulnerable and irrelevant, on the one hand, and effective, strong and resilient, on the other.²

I am intuitively attracted to innovation and remain deeply aware that continuous evolution must be normal. Together, the potential that both evolution and innovation present is where we need to be. My sense is most of our currently planned future investment would best be described as 'evolutionary adaptation', with only perhaps 10% of our efforts focused on riskier innovation. Pushing towards 20% is probably where we need to be.

Teaming with Technology

Armies and defence forces are forever trying to enhance the power they can harness in pursuit of national interest. *Plan Beersheba* and an emphasis on networking are indicative examples. Historically, armies have sought power through size and mobilisation planning, innovative technology, training and education, formal alliances and

² Ferguson, Gregor (2017), 'Preconditions for innovation success (part 2): industry's role', *The ASPI Strategist Weblog*, accessed at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/preconditions-for-innovation-success-part-2-industrys-role/> on 28 November 2017.

coalitions of the willing, and more recently through joint, combined and interagency operations; or typically through all of the above.

Despite these efforts, could the sheer scale of a future security challenge overwhelm our capacity to cope? Possibly, it's happened before. Someday it's almost guaranteed if we hold to the mindsets and modes of industrial age warfighting. For a small force, the Australian Army and ADF can never forget, but also never accept, Stalin's famous aphorism: *'quantity has a quality all of its own'*. Our strategic policy is based on the view that the quantity of people is not necessarily decisive. And if quality is rising across our region we need to keep pursuing new, challenging opportunities. Today, in this regard, I refer to teaming with technology that disproportionately magnifies the scale and effect of our organisation, collective intellect, doctrine, training and education.

We know that digital technology is transforming some aspects of the character of warfare and the domains in which it may be conducted. Soon, perhaps sooner than we might be comfortable, the impact of hypersonic, autonomous robotic, quantum and artificial intelligence technologies will revolutionise the conduct of warfare. We can see the crest of a new wave of technology approaching: while distant, its big, gnarly, moving fast and its finer details are mostly hidden. The true nature, impact and timing of technological change is never accurately predicted, especially when it's happening around you, and to you. What's always apparent in hindsight is late adoptors struggle to catch up. The scale of China's commitment to artificial intelligence research is indicative of a nation determined not to be late to that party.

Australia has a well-educated population and a relatively capable and innovative science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector, for a nation our size. Indeed, we lead global research efforts in some niche areas. Importantly, we also have close collaborative relationships with a number of global STEM leaders, including the UK. The Australian Army will team with this next impending technological revolution because it makes sense and we must. We're too small not too. We will work from the foundation assumption that technology works best when enabling or partnering human endeavour - but I expect that will be quickly challenged.

Both the UK and Australia are very aware that the 'can do' of technical capability will, and is now rapidly outpacing, the moral, ethical and legal considerations of 'should do'. This will only accelerate, driven by those state and non-state actors alike who feel unconstrained by such notions or the laws of war. ISIS and the DPRK might be today's exemplars, but it's a congested field.

The concerns recently expressed by scientists, ethicists and advocates regarding the rise of 'killer bots' are very real and worth noting. I suspect a middle way is likely to emerge. We already see humans out of the loop to manage the split second requirements of ship and vehicle short-range active protective systems. The debate and its resolution are vital to our future but also a healthy reminder of a history, culture and political civilisation worth defending.

Conclusion

Australian strategic policy envisages an increasingly challenging world. That policy seeks to avoid conflict but prepares our Army, as a component of the Australian Defence Force, to fight our nation's wars if necessary. Our people are the core capability through which the Australian Army will meet the challenges of the Indo-Pacific century. Key to our future success will be the considerable intellectual talent the Army possesses or can draw upon, to innovatively build and harness a powerful land force, combining our people and partners with the culture, strategy, concepts and technology to win. I have deliberately covered a lot of ground quickly today and would welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Thank you.