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Australia's Direction on Defense

Military and political leaders discuss the direction for the ADF at a recent conference.

By Claire Corbett

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It was telling that the important announcements in Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's speech last week at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) conference on the future structure of the Australian Army were all to do with the Navy. This is because, despite the Army's near-constant deployment overseas and high tempo of operations over the past fifteen years, Australian military strategy defines the frontline defense of the continent as the role of the Navy and Air Force. And frontline defense is certainly on the minds of Australian politicians and military personnel: Anxiety over the situation in the South China Sea was palpable during this conference, both from speakers and within the audience.

Attendees were mostly senior Army officers, there also to hear one of the first public speeches from their new Chief of Army, former Special Forces soldier Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, who most recently headed up Operation Sovereign Borders. Campbell in fact played his cards close to his chest, saying that with the release of the Defence White Paper 2015 imminent, he was not ready to list his priorities yet. He did emphasize that, although continuing modernization and cultural renewal of the Army was critical, he was "not an adherent to the false god of high-tech war." Like many Army commanders in what he called this age of "democratized lethality," he emphasized the ongoing importance of "boots on the ground," saying "war often ends on land because that is where we live."

The prime minister's speech had been much-anticipated as it was hoped he would give clues to the direction and policies within the long-awaited Defence White Paper 2015. When the Coalition government came to power in September 2013 it dumped the 2013 Defence White Paper, drafted under the aegis of the previous Labor Government, and commissioned a new one along with a recently released First Principles Review.

So, what clues did Abbott give to the future of Australian defense policy? First, he gave his strongest indication yet that Australia's \$50 billion future submarine would not be built in Australia, commenting, "It is certainly not necessary or practical that all our defense equipment be made here in Australia but it is necessary that it be sustainable in Australia."

This implies that despite the prime minister's reiteration that procurement of the subs would come about through a "competitive evaluation process," he is still strongly leaning towards Option J, buying the boats from Japan. This is because the other contenders in the as-yet undefined "competitive evaluation process," the French and the Germans, have both assured Australia that their designs could be built in Australia, an idea not favored by Japan.

Abbott's biggest announcement was a commitment to retain Australian naval shipbuilding despite a view that building naval ships in Australia could be up to 40 percent more expensive. The prime minister promised "a continuous build of major surface warships here in Australia to avoid the unproductive on-again, off-again cycle that has done this industry so much damage." If Abbott sticks to this commitment it will be the most momentous announcement from this conference, which, ironically, made no progress in defining the future role and scope of the mission of the Army or the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as a whole.

The difficulty is that while politicians and policymakers pay lip service to the importance of ADF commitment to bolstering security in the Asia-Pacific region, with memories of its role in East Timor from 1999-01 looming large, the reality is that the Army's recent history has mainly been committed to what looks more like alliance-tending in the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO).

This perception was reinforced by the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Pacific, General Vincent Brooks, who commended Australia for being "such a reliable partner," stating "you're there time and time again" and thanking Australia "for being the ally and partner we can always count on." This praise made some in the audience uneasy, spelling out as it did how closely our strategic posture is tied to the U.S. As one senior analyst fretted, if things hot up in the South China Sea, Australia will find it difficult to maintain independence of action or policy.

The reality is, as Dr. John Blaxland of the Australian National University pointed out, that the Army and ADF are not big enough to attend to regional security and prioritize alliance-tending at the same time. Australia dropped the ball in East Timor when Dili erupted into chaos in May 2006, Blaxland said, and few understood what had happened or why. The ADF, distracted with a rejig of forces in southern Iraq and a redeployment of ground troops to Afghanistan, cobbled together a force from elements not already committed elsewhere to deploy to Dili. The entire incident showed the effect of Australia's lack of sustained engagement in our region while pursuing higher profile missions elsewhere.

This links to the broader issue of lack of depth in our regional diplomacy. As opposition leader, Tony Abbott declared his foreign policy would be “more Jakarta and less Geneva,” but relations since then have soured for a number of reasons. On June 29, 2015, former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa commented that Australia’s relationship with Indonesia appears to be at its lowest point. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported Natalegawa as saying he suspects there is no private communication between the two countries.

The Diplomat spoke to a number of senior Army officers attending the conference whether they agreed that the Army needed to focus its efforts in the region. To a man they insisted that the force must continue to undertake all that it has been doing. But the point is that they are not in fact achieving all that they need to be doing, with the ADF’s regional language and cultural skills in decline. As Blaxland said, “we were learning Pashtun instead of Tagalog.”

Almost every speaker referred to the small size of the ADF. Australia makes niche contributions to coalition efforts in the MEAO and have become used to extraordinary levels of logistical support from the U.S. The Army is, as a number of speakers said, “a boutique force” and when it resumes leadership of missions in Australia’s own region, the ADF will have to be far more self-reliant.

ASPI’s Michael Clifford noted the problem in his preview of the conference: “The explanation lies in the policy tension that still exists between Australia’s role as a ‘middle power’ and our perceived national security priorities. The current Government seems to favor a more expansive global role for Australia’s defense force compared with a narrow, more traditional regional focus.”

Presumably in keeping with this more expansive global role, Abbott reiterated his government’s commitment to bolstering defense spending to 2 percent of GDP: “At a time when the armed forces of like-minded nations are facing cuts, Australia is boosting defense spending to almost \$32 billion next year and \$132 billion over the forward estimates. That is an increase of almost \$10 billion compared with the four-year estimates announced in last year’s Budget.”

There are difficulties with using the 2 percent of GDP target as a measure of defense spending. Conceptually the target began “as an eye-catching comparison between Australia’s defense budget in 2012 and 1938” but the difficulty is that it tells us nothing about what the size, scope and role of the ADF should be. The real task is to define and rank the strategic risks Australia could face and then determine the defense capabilities needed to manage these risks. The new Defence White Paper needs to prioritize funding capabilities that will counter risks in Australia’s own region. Current government policy and defense force deployments do not yet provide reassurance that this will happen.