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# STUDENT ESSAY

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LIGHT FORCES IN THE DEFENSE OF AUSTRALIA

BY

COLONEL JOHN M. SANDERSON

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constrained resources. What is new is the stated political commitment to a more regional and self reliant Defence posture in recognition of strategic realities. While the logic of this requirement, and Australia's relative geographic and demographic position generates an advanced technology/high strategic mobility solution, great care must be taken to ensure that real warfighting capabilities are not sacrificed to create an illusion of deterrence. Light ground forces such as those now being developed within the force structure of the US Army have real utility in situations leading up to full hostilities, but they must be backed up by heavier forces if their use in pre-emptive or 'trip wire' deployments is to generate caution in those against whom such deployments are directed. Australia cannot afford to maintain a large standing ground force, but in order to be able to field a capable Army in times of developing emergency, she must maintain an expansion base from which the leadership and technical knowledge for a rapid expansion can be drawn. Warning time estimates which are used as a basis for determining the size of such an expansion base must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny in the light of the historical record of the responses of policymakers to changes in the international environment, as well as the stated intentions and capabilities of other nations.

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LIGHT FORCES IN THE DEFENSE OF AUSTRALIA

by

Colonel John M. Sanderson

Australian Army

US Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013  
12 May 1986

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### ABSTRACT

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The balance between light and heavier units within the force structure of the Australian Army is a subject of considerable conjecture at policymaking levels in the Department of Defence and Government. The high cost of modern military equipment is narrowing the number and depth of capabilities the nation can sustain in peacetime. This is not a new experience for Australia, where the lightening of land force capabilities has occurred in the past in response to a perceived favourable strategic environment and constrained resources. What is new is the stated political commitment to a more regional and self reliant Defence posture in recognition of strategic realities. While the logic of this requirement, and Australia's relative geographic and demographic position generates an advanced technology/high strategic mobility solution, great care must be taken to ensure that real warfighting capabilities are not sacrificed to create an illusion of deterrence. Light ground forces such as those now being developed within the force structure of the US Army have real utility in situations leading up to full hostilities, but they must be backed up by heavier forces if their use in pre-emptive or 'trip wire' deployments is to generate caution in those against whom such deployments are directed. Australia cannot afford to maintain a large standing ground force, but in order to be able to field a capable Army in times of developing emergency, she must maintain an expansion base from which the leadership and technical knowledge for a rapid expansion can be drawn. Warning time estimates which are used as a basis for determining the size of such an expansion base must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny in the light of the historical record of the responses of policymakers to changes in the international environment, as well as the stated intentions and capabilities of other nations.

LIGHT FORCES IN THE DEFENSE OF AUSTRALIA

BY

COLONEL JOHN M SANDERSON

INTRODUCTION

The volatility of contemporary debate on military force structure is a reflection of the bewildering rate of technological and societal change confronting analysts, professional soldiers and their political masters. The high cost of defense programs and the lead time taken to realign military capabilities to changes in strategy induce an urgency in this debate which, in the past, has only been known in times leading directly to major conflict.

Bureaucratic structures and the analytical processes associated with them have grown in magnitude and complexity to reflect this urgency. Despite this growth, force structure determination, being essentially a threat oriented activity, more often than not embodies the same subjective perceptions of future intentions and possibilities as pervades all areas of study of mass human behaviour. Because of this subjectivity the deliberation processes are always at risk of being eroded for political purposes-particularly where there is general consensus that the threat is remote in space and time.

Western democracies are inevitably more prone to this failing than more authoritarian regimes. Their constitutions have been deliberately designed to promote the controlled competition for resources between strong interest groups while protecting the rights of the weaker elements of society. In the

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permanent climate of uncertainty which surrounds the Defense debate there is great pressure on political leaders to contain or reduce spending on military equipment and manpower in order to promote welfare or social engineering programs. Small wonder then that there is a compelling urge to grasp strategies and doctrine which are considered to be innovative and which, at the same time, offer opportunities for reductions in force structure, and therefore, military budgets.

Contributing to this pressure on politicians is the pervading suspicion that the Army, Navy and Airforce often act out of self interest in the budgetary process and therefore seek to oppose force structure innovations because they will erode the resourcing of programs cherished by the military heirarchy. Support for this view of the Services as essentially conservative and reactionary can be found in the many historical examples where military leadership has failed to grasp the consequences of changing technology and doctrine, promoting instead those tried and sometimes irrelevant elements of force structure from which it derived its institutional base.

These aspects of uncertainty, the urge to limit military spending and underlying distrust of military instincts all combine to influence the contemporary debate on Defense force structure in Australia. In the absence of a clearly defined threat, and in the face of a unique geography, the search is on for an enduring and affordable solution for Australian defense. In this climate the increasing emphasis on light forces within the force structure of the United States Army draws the obvious

response that, if the West's leading military power can structure forces which at once have both high strategic mobility and combat power, then heavier land forces may no longer be relevant to Australian defense needs.

#### PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this essay is to examine light force developments and to analyse the potential for effective employment of light forces in the defense of Australia. The essay will identify the strengths and weaknesses of an army force structure based on light units and formations, and compare their utility in an Australian context with more substantial options for force structure.

The essay begins by attempting a broad and essentially philosophical view of the nature of war and the military ethos before looking at specific aspects of the Australian strategic outlook and the appropriate force structure for both the short and long term.

#### WAR AND THE WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

There is ample evidence to support the view that modern democracies, whether based on the Westminster or the Republican systems, are unlikely to go to war unless it is in the defense of interests vital to their survival as free and independent nations. In most cases the fact that survival is threatened will not be sufficiently obvious to generate nationwide consensus on the use of force until there is a direct attack on a large body of nationals, sovereign territory or the territory of an ally

whose defense has become a matter of national honour through treaty. What this means is simply that a democracy will always begin a war on the defensive, on terms selected by the enemy, inevitably under conditions of relative surprise and in a climate of uncertainty as to the appropriate strategic response.

This susceptibility to surprise presents the ultimate paradox in western strategic policymaking. Although it is widely recognised that there is a high probability of strategic surprise occurring, the force structure and readiness posture of western defense forces are usually designed for conflicts beginning in specific places against identified forces and within certain warning times based on a carefully selected set of indicators which are the result of rigorous analysis. While it must be assumed that intelligence resources are devoted to gaining information on the intentions of potential enemies from sources close to or within their decision making apparatus, the capacity to transform knowledge gained by these means into a form suitable for democratic debate is very limited.

Western leaders therefore face the dilemma of either having to delay the decision to commit the nation to war until the indicators cannot be ignored by their constituency or, deliberately contriving a situation or provocation which is sufficiently alarming to allow national support for executive action on the preparation for war. The risks in either approach are obvious. A cursory analysis of the influence of the growth in consensus politics and power diffusion in the West would indicate that an extreme form of the first option is the most

likely.

Translating this pessimistic view to its impact on force structure raises the implication that the democracies will inevitably have the wrong force structure in the wrong place to match the immediate threats when they occur. Strategic surprise!

What then has deterred forces inimicable to the interests of western nations from adopting a more provocative form of brinkmanship? The answer to this question is clearly the resiliency of the democracies which, once having developed national consensus on the need to wage war, present an implacable and enduring foe. Looked at from the position of a power elite with a contrived mandate which has to contend with the bellicosity of subservient peoples of different cultures, the prospect of a long war with a democracy is unfavourable.

There are some fundamental deductions on the philosophy for force structuring the military forces of democracies which can be drawn from these assessments. Firstly, while it is clearly desirable to avoid being surprised, the high probability that it will occur must be accepted. The critical requirement is therefore to have a force structure which is sufficiently flexible to generate a rapid response to new types and directions of offence such that national collapse and, if possible, the collapse of allies can be avoided while treaty partners prepare themselves to wage war to a satisfactory conclusion. Looked at in the light of democratic values and traditions such a concept is probably closer to a true definition of deterrence than the capacity to exact massive retribution on an attacker.

Resilience and flexibility in a nation's defense capability is a product of many factors other than force structure, but it is force structure and training which produces the most important element-that is a military leadership with the professional knowledge and confidence to both respond decisively to new directions of threat with the available forces, and to contribute to the development of an appropriate strategy and policy for the successful termination of the conflict. In simpler terms, only an experienced military leadership can assess the strengths and weaknesses of an enemy's military position and determine the military component of a national strategy to achieve agreed objectives. At the same time, if precious lives are not to be lost, the force structure and doctrinal requirements of a chosen strategy must be generated by an experienced leadership rather than being risked totally on the capacity of amateurs (no matter how gifted) to develop appropriate battlefield responses.

An obvious response to these assertions would be that such an experience level is unlikely to be generated in other than actual conflict. The truth of such an observation could not be disputed, which explains in large part the custom in the days when wars had a less ideological basis of attaching military observers to both sides in a conflict for the purpose of assessing the technological and doctrinal lessons generated. However, even this type of experience, were it available today, could not substitute completely for the depth of understanding required in an Army to establish and maintain a modern, technology dependent force in the field and get it to fight

sustained, high intensity battles. Only realistic training in the field with these forces is an effective substitute.

The other resource absorbing component of preparedness is force readiness which, like force structure, should be a direct product of foreseen threats. The high cost of readiness is attested to by the fact that much of what is called readiness, ie high levels of individual skill and collective training, is perishable in a way that other products of defense spending are not. Within finite Defense budgets there is obviously an offsetting balance between readiness and longer term investment in the force structure. An Army at a higher state of readiness could be expected to forego some desirable developments in force structure, equipment, facilities or conditions of service. Additionally, heightened readiness normally requires a narrowing of the spectrum of training in which an Army can be involved.

On the other hand, high readiness requirements are appreciated by military leaders because of their usefulness in clarifying training and planning objectives and in motivating subordinates. The leadership task is far easier, although there is always the risk of complacency developing in the face of prolonged readiness, which can lead in turn to an exaggeration of the circumstances from which the mission is derived. What is most important is that a balance be maintained to avoid the sacrifice of an enduring ability to respond to unforeseen threats in the interests of short term readiness.

Australia has always been part of the Western Alliance, first as a part of the British Empire and, since World War 2, as a member of the SEATO and ANZUS alliances. Throughout this century her small population, large borders and isolation have compelled her to a strategy of forward defense expressed mainly in the form of the contribution of forces as a minor partner in stabilizing conflicts on the approaches. Korea, the Malayan Emergency, Confrontation with Indonesia, and the Vietnam conflict were all applications of this strategy.

While it is always difficult to attest accurately to the success of a particular strategy, the present relative stability of the region surrounding Australia has contributed to a higher level of prosperity and, temporarily at least, reduced the potential for conflict. A new balance of military and economic power is evolving and, although there are some destabilising influences, both internal and external, there appears to be a widespread vested interest in regional economic and diplomatic cooperation.

Uncertain of her future part in this new Asian order, but convinced of the need to become accepted as a player in the region, Australia continues to struggle with the military role this will entail. Temporarily at least, excessive prudence has pushed her towards a concept of continental defense with very little other than low level security assistance being considered for the region. Given the limited Defense funds available for capital investment, it is clear that a prolonged adherence to such a policy will limit the capacity for any form of power

projection beyond the continent should governments of the future consider it necessary to do so.

Short of a global conflict, it is very difficult to see a direct military threat to the Australian mainland such as the feared Japanese invasion of World War 2. For that reason, Australia's primary strategic interest lies in ensuring that the western alliance remains sufficiently strong and stable to deter risk taking by other forces. At the same time, the promotion of independent defence capabilities in the nations of the region through security assistance and regional cooperation aids regional stability. Despite the fact that Australia has not tied herself to any specific contingency plans through forward deployment, she has tacit obligations to most of the small nations of the South Pacific, and to Malaysia and Singapore in the event of an external or externally sponsored threat. In the case of the latter two nations, the Five Power Defense Agreement, which includes Britain and New Zealand remains extant.

Disregarding the remote requirement to wage a counter insurgency campaign in Australia, the types of conflict in which the nation could be involved in descending order of likelihood are:

- . the provision of in-country training assistance to nations in the region facing severe insurgency problems which require a rapid expansion forces, eg, the Phillipines;

- . the provision of counter insurgency forces to assist nations which could develop an externally sponsored insurgency problem beyond the resources of their military, eg, Malaysia,



Papua New Guinea;

. the provision of forces to nations facing a conventional threat beyond their resources, in which case the conflict, while limited, would probably have global strategic implications and would be waged as part of an alliance, eg, Malaysia, Indonesia etc;

. the provision of conventional forces to assist in the seizure and holding of strategic and operational objectives, and to deny the use of the seas within the region to enemy forces in the event of a global conflict.

No time scale can be placed on the probability of these events. While the last is the least likely, it could occur with startling rapidity given a miscalculation in the event of a crisis elsewhere. Indeed, the consequences of just such an occurrence draws other nations of the Western Alliance to a high state of readiness designed to minimise the risk of any such miscalculation. Nevertheless, an eventuality of this nature cannot be entirely discounted and, it is suggested, that for the foreseeable future it provides the only scenario in which a threat to continental Australia could become a reality.

The most likely event in the shorter term- the provision of training assistance to nations expanding their capability for counter insurgency operations, is one which would be the subject of considerable political resistance due to lingering misgivings about the Vietnam experience. No doubt every attempt would be made to forestall such a commitment by the offering of other forms of security assistance and training of cadre in Australia.

Nevertheless, it would be difficult to refuse a request from a regional nation with democratic bona fides given the alternative of watching it fall into the eastern camp and the consequent increase in instability in the region.

A diminishing reservoir of experience in the types of operations associated with counter insurgency remains in the Australian Army. More importantly, the hard core of professional skills needed to establish and conduct training programmes for all rank levels is probably greater than in any other regional force, despite the Army's smallness. Recognition of this fact enhances Australia's military standing in the region, the benefits of which justify nurturing this capability for the future. At the same time, the retention of such a reputation carries with it obligations which would make it difficult to ignore any requests received from her Asian and Pacific neighbours and still retain some influence in the region.

On the other hand, the commitment of manoeuvre forces to a counter insurgency campaign is less likely than the provision of training assistance by several degrees of magnitude. Third party involvement in civil wars provides few rewards. Where however, the insurgency has external sponsorship by parties whose primary interest is in destabilising the region and gaining strategic leverage, consideration would have to be given to assisting in the isolation of the insurgents from that support. This concept is different to previous counter insurgency campaigns in which the Australian Army has been involved, but parallels closely the type of strategy proposed by General Bruce Palmer as outlined in

Harry Summer's book "On Strategy :The Vietnam War in Context".<sup>1</sup> In proposing a strategy of blockade by the Navy and the Army taking the strategic and tactical defensive along a line established from the DMZ across Laos to the Thai border, General Palmer suggests that this would have forced the North Vietnamese to a more conventional offensive in order to support the Viet Cong, which in turn, would have clarified the issues, reduced the resources required and probably have shortened the war.

While the appropriateness of such a strategy for Vietnam remains a subject for historical speculation only, it is clear that it is far better for a third party to avoid embroilment in the internal struggle by limiting itself to a more conventional defensive role which places the blame for aggression where it should lie. In Australia's situation, for the most part such a role could only be contemplated in the context of a regional alliance given that the defensive battles would have to be won, and this may require large conventional forces. Importantly, the adoption of such a strategy could entail the employment of land, sea and air forces in conventional operations such as those conducted at Khe Sanh or Dien Bien Phu.

The forces required for counter insurgency strategies such as this vary little from those needed for assistance to nations subject to attacks by conventional forces with clear cut tactical and operational objectives. With the exception that the latter would probably require greater emphasis on capabilities needed for tactical offensive operations, the force structure required for both types of conflict would have much the same

characteristics.

## FORCE REQUIREMENTS

Given then that with the exception of the remote possibility of counter insurgency operations in Australia, and the provision of training assistance in counter insurgency operations to regional allies, Australia's foreseen operational commitments require the deployment of conventional forces, what characteristics should those forces have? The answer to this question can be discussed in the broad terms of:

- .combat power,
- .strategic mobility,
- .sustainability, and
- .affordability

### Combat Power

Clauswitz's dictum that:

"Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy's force as a means to a further end. That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting the enemy would be destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

remains the primary distinction between war and other parts of the spectrum of human relations. To go to war without a clear understanding of this essential difference can only lead to

disaster. While Clausewitz goes on to emphasize the escalatory danger of adhering unintelligently to this dictum, he urges great caution in the adoption of less violent military strategies with the warning that a commander "must always keep an eye on his opponent so that he does not , if the latter has taken up a sharp sword, approach him armed only with an ornamental rapier".<sup>3</sup>

The sharp sword of combat power includes the elements of firepower, protection, tactical mobility, command and control (including surveillance and intelligence systems), training and morale. It is a relative term, influenced by terrain, climate, the phase of war, a myriad of administrative factors and, very importantly, leadership. Most strategists since Sun Tzu have warned against engaging in battle when combat power is less than the enemy's, or even when it is marginal. Without doubt, victories are generators of combat power, and losses rarely enhance an Army's preparedness to wage future battles. Significantly, a short war demands that one side generates a sufficient margin of combat power supremacy as rapidly as possible to either destroy the enemy forces or their will to fight. Given the debilitating consequences of a long war—particularly for a democracy, it is not in Australia's interests to engage in a conflict overseas where such supremacy cannot be generated.

There is clearly a qualitative as well as a quantitative aspect to each of the elements of combat power. The demographic trends in Australia's region of interest point to the likelihood of Australian forces being numerically inferior to potential

opponents. For this reason the qualitative enhancement of all aspects of combat power would appear to provide the most favourable direction for force development. The key force structure issue for Australia here is that she have the capacity to raise and use the the necessary combat power once the dimensions of the conflict are known and accepted. This implies a Defense Force that has within it, at least in embrionic form, the knowledge and the skills to deploy and sustain in an innovative fashion the material aspects of superior combat power.

Theoretically the hardware elements of combat power should be drawn from the doctrine and the threat. In practical terms, this is rarely possible as few nations can afford the cost or the time to completely re-equip in the face of new threats. Rather, it becomes a matter of improvising with the assets on hand, using them in the best possible way until they can be added to or partly replaced by more appropriate equipments. This need for improvisation highlights further the requirement for high quality manpower and leadership and the inclusion in the inventory of adaptable equipments with high servicability in a wide variety of regional terrain and climates. Conversely, the more specialised the equipment assets become the greater will be the difficulty in adapting them to use in other areas and other ways.

Much of this adaptability can be built into naval and air assets which can be designed to carry a range of weapons for a variety of purposes. For Australia, multi-role vessels and aircraft can carry the necessary weapon systems to both protect themselves and project power beyond the coastline. While

tactical mobility is characteristic of them, unfortunately, unless they are used in great numbers, such equipments can do little against determined troops moving across country or in short coastal manouevres made at night or under cover of air defense aircraft operating at short distances from defended airfields. Such deployments have to be deterred or met and defeated by the employment of ground forces. If they are not they will inevitably change the balance of combat power to the enemy's advantage.

In Australia's region the nature of these ground forces would vary according to the location. For example, a conventional ground threat in Thailand or Malaysia could have all the characteristics of a modern, armour heavy, European style force with long range artillery and moderate command and control systems such as those used in the invasion of South Vietnam in 1975. On the other hand, a conventional threat against the Indonesian archipelago and Papua New Guinea could be expected to consist only of light forces, at least initially, until some build up of logistic support could take place to allow the operation of heavier forces. This is a long term prospect only unless there is a collapse of Western resolve to defend the region or serious social problems which cause the rise of a radical government in either country. Given the low probability of either case for the immediate future, a contribution to the defense of both these nations and northern Australia could be satisfied with lighter ground forces which have higher strategic mobility.

Ground forces, whether light or heavy, must also have tactical mobility if they are to develop superior firepower by manoeuvre. Too often this mobility is viewed as simply a requirement to move rapidly over large distances to surprise or pre-empt opponents without due regard for the other component of tactical mobility, which is the need to concentrate in the face of the enemy. A consequence of this is a tendency to attribute a decisiveness to the employment of light, highly mobile forces which flies in the face of reality. Even in so called low intensity conflicts the combat soldier without armoured protection is as vulnerable as his World War 1 counterpart when the situation calls for direct confrontation of the enemy in prepared positions. Admittedly, developing technology may be providing lighter weapon systems which are useful in the defense against heavy or light forces, but there are no alternatives to armoured protection, mobility and firepower in the tactical offense given reasonably open terrain.

While most of the Australian continent is open terrain with good fields of fire and comparatively easy target acquisition, much of the neighbouring region is either urbanised, agricultural, secondary growth or rugged rainforest. This closeness, combined with a drenching wet season, limits the employment of heavy cross country vehicles. Most battles are fought at close quarters by lightly equipped infantry. Despite this, on several occasions in recent history it has been found desirable during the dry season to use light or medium armoured vehicles in close combat in order to reduce the attrition of



infantry forces. Medium tanks were used in MacArthur's island hopping campaign in the South West Pacific, and extensive use was made of armoured vehicles of all types by both sides in the Vietnam conflict.

In summary, it is not enough simply to be able to move rapidly around the future battlefields in Australia's region. Defensive battles may be won by manoueuvering light forces to attrit and disrupt attacking forces, but when it comes to the decisive battles of a campaign, offensive action will invariably be required. Given the destructive power of modern small arms and crew served weapons, concentration for such offensive action without adequate suppressing fires and protection will result in excessive casualties. This assertion applies equally for low or high intensity operations.

#### Strategic Mobility

Australia is a vast country. Defense of all of it against a substantial conventional threat could only be contemplated on the basis of the prevention of the use of, or the destruction of the bases and lines of communication from whence such a threat could be mounted. In essence this would entail the capacity to deploy forces outside Australia on the approaches through the Indonesian archipelago, Papua New Guinea or the South Pacific islands. Based on the assumption that such expeditions would only be undertaken at the invitation of governments, which, through reluctance to sacrifice sovereignty, would delay the

request, rapid deployment of these forces or part of them would seem to be necessary. Given the fact that most of the Australian population, and the Defense Force, is concentrated on the eastern and southern coastlines, a similar requirement exists for the defense of northern and western Australia and the island territories in the Indian Ocean, ie, Christmas and Cocos Islands.

A logical conclusion from this assumption is that a significant part of the Australian ground forces should be deployable by air and should have the capacity, when so deployed, to sustain themselves until heavier support can follow by sea and overland. The chief problem lies in determining how much should be air deployable and how much should have other war fighting characteristics which would be sacrificed for airportability. Because of the distances involved there is a tendency in Australian force structure considerations to become trapped in the illusion that any equipment that cannot be moved by air lacks utility; this despite the fact that Australia is never likely to have the airlift capacity to move large self contained forces in timeframes significantly less than it would take to drive or ship them.

Sufficient units to conduct a rapid pre-emptive deployment at the strategic level only need to be maintained as an integrated air deployment force. For the remainder of the ground forces, strategic mobility should be thought of in terms of their capacity to be deployed by road, rail and sea. This is not to imply that components of these remaining forces should not have airportable equipments; rather it is to suggest that air

transportability should not be their primary force structure determinant. In view of the paucity of good deep water ports in Australia's region, the capacity to go ashore over beaches is probably of greater importance.

Strategic mobility in Australian terms therefore, should be thought more in terms of the means rather than ends. It is transport aircraft, ships, trucks, roads, railways and terminals which are the key ingredients. While combat equipments must be able to pass through these mediums successfully, it is their battlefield function which should be the primary determinant of their characteristics.

#### Sustainability

There are two major components to the sustainability question. One is the ability to support the force from the national infrastructure. The other is the capacity to support the required tempo of operations in the field. Both are force structure related matters.

In the first instance, self reliance demands that the nation has the capacity to maintain any equipment procured for military use. While it is too much to state that all spare parts should be manufactured in Australia, clearly the frequently used items should be. The same applies to fundamental ammunition natures, eg, 5.56mm SA, 7.62mm SA, 105mm and 155mm HE etc. It would be unwise to develop the force structure around equipments

with maintenance requirements beyond the reach of the foreseen level of national technology. Similarly, the procurement of equipments from suppliers who are unwilling to share the technology should be avoided, no matter how good the product.

The logistic force structure to support operations is a direct function of the nature of the combat force, the infrastructure in the area of operations and the logistic concepts for support. As most operations will be conducted in areas remote from the main Australian support area, the object should be to reduce the level and complexity of support required for equipments by ensuring high robustness, serviceability, diagnostic characteristics and simplicity are built in. Having said that, it is clear that even with the streamlining all aspects of logistic support as much as possible to reduce the supporting infrastructure, the tempo of operations will be dictated by the rate at which manpower and materiel can be fed into the combat zone. A force structure which cannot be supported at the optimum rate is probably inefficient and would need to be revised.

In theory, light forces should be less equipment intensive and should therefore require less support. This is only true if they are able to fight the battles for which they are designed. Forced into a close quarter battle in open terrain they could be expected to experience attrition levels beyond those of heavier forces.

## Affordability

The accelerating arms race between the superpowers continues to cause the replacement and elevation of the level of technology found on the battlefield at an unprecedented rate. It is becoming increasingly difficult for smaller economies to compete in this environment, particularly as the cost of modern equipment rises exponentially.

Australia has had to become more discriminating in equipment procurement, looking for variations to strategy and doctrine as opposed to replacing equipments at life of type with the most up to date technology available at the time. Serious consideration must now be given to procuring more robust, but less advanced technologies, which lend themselves to adaptation, including modification in the field. Alternative suppliers need to be considered as the prices of equipments produced by traditional suppliers move beyond what can be afforded, eg, the M1 tank, the Bradley MICV, the Apache and Blackhawk helicopters.

It is in this climate that talk of smaller, lighter forces with high combat power has its greatest appeal. Many of the United States allies looked with eager anticipation for the fruits of the High Technology Test Bed Division in the early 1980s and in turn, listen with interest to the developing characteristics of the US light divisions to determine if the equipment, organisation and associated doctrine will provide solutions more appropriate to their situations.

## LIGHT FORCES

What are light forces? What defines them and are they by definition less able to perform on the modern battlefields than their heavier counterparts?

For the purpose of this essay the term light forces will be assumed to embrace special forces and Ranger type units as well as those formations that do not have a full range of organic mobility, including the United States Army light infantry division, the airborne division and the air assault division. The primary characteristic which differentiates these organisations from other elements of the US Army force structure is their strategic mobility which reflects in turn their intended roles.

Basically, none of these forces are logistically independent which means that if they are to conduct independent operations they must graft themselves on to an in-country logistic support system or, only conduct operations of very limited duration before they are reinforced by logistic support from higher echelons. With the exception of the air assault division, none of these units has adequate organic tactical mobility which seriously limits their capacity to react in strength over large distances without the use of transport assets from other echelons. While they are suited to operations in close country or urban environments, they lack the capability to move themselves rapidly from one close environment to another.

The United States Army has had light forces in the form of Special Forces, Rangers, and both the airborne and airmobile divisions for some time. While all of these forces had a worldwide mission, analysis of the probability of various types of conflict occurring led the Chiefs of Staff to the conclusion that there were insufficient forces to meet the low to mid intensity requirements of strategic policy. Most importantly, those forces that did exist lacked the strategic mobility that these missions entailed. As the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, General John A. Wickham, Jr said in an interview for the Armed Forces Journal in October 1985:

"We need to improve the lighter side of the Army so that we can be more relevant to the strategic threats that we're likely to face and the strategic realities in terms of lift shortfalls that we face. That's the genesis of the light division initiative."<sup>4</sup>

This assessment led to the establishment of an additional Special Forces unit and Ranger battalion, a reduction in the size of the airborne and air assault divisions, and the establishment of four light infantry divisions, two of which were new formations on the order of battle. Significantly, these additions to the Army were made without an increase in overall strength, the positions being made up by an Army-wide skimming of numbers. A consequence of this was a reduction in size of the heavy divisions designed for high intensity combat, an adjustment which is being attempted without loss of total combat power by technological enhancement of some capabilities and concentration

of others at corps or higher level. In essence, the focus of tactical operations has shifted towards the corps level, with greater emphasis being placed on joint operations over the total depth of the battlefield.

A further consequence was the need to find a role for the light infantry divisions in the high intensity scenarios, given the requirement to enhance, or at least retain the same level of force available for Europe. The design criteria for this division was therefore:

"(1)The division force design will be optimized for employment at the lower end of the conflict spectrum in a contingency mission, yet will retain utility for employment at higher conflict levels(NATO).

(2)The division must be deployable in 400 to 500 aircraft sorties.

(3)The division will contain approximately 50 percent infantry.

(4)The division design will have nine manoeuvre battalions."5

The foreseen employment of these light divisions in NATO was outlined by General Wickham in a 1985 article for "NATO's Sixteen Nations":

"the light infantry division offers great employment flexibility in the NATO environment.

Some options are:

Employ as organised in close terrain capitalizing on obstacles and the extensive



night fighting capabilities of the division.

Integrate with forward deployed forces for operations in mixed terrain.

Augment before deployment, employ appropriately.

Employ after receipt of NATO pre-positioned equipment (POMCUS).

Tailor by cross attaching brigades from forward deployed divisions."6

The implication here is obvious. The divisions are only expected to fight high intensity battles in restricted terrain such as the urban areas and forests of Germany. Their utility in any other situation is severely limited by their lack of mobility, firepower and protection which must be augmented from higher echelons or other divisions if they are to survive, let alone fight. One could be forgiven for concluding that the need to regroup assets in the fast moving combat of the European battlefield which this implies may be a significant liability and detract from the corps commander's ability to manoeuvre his forces. Clearly, it is much better for him to have infantry forces which can dismount from their organic fighting vehicles to fight in restricted terrain if necessary, and yet are fully employable in the more fluid operations of open country where the decisive battles will be fought.

On the positive side of this development is the attention which continues to be given to the enhancement of the light technology for these divisions. Improved anti-armour weapons,

night fighting capabilities, surveillance equipments, lightweight tactical fire control systems, counter mobility and logistic systems are all areas of future development which could have decided benefits for smaller armies.

Nevertheless, from the Australian viewpoint, it is obvious that the US light forces are not intended to fight alone in a mid to high intensity conflict. Nor are they intended to fight unreinforced in a maturing low intensity theatre. Rather, they are intended to be employed in the early stages of a developing crisis because:

"In low intensity conflict, light infantry forces are a potent deterrent because they can be deployed rapidly to provide a national response at the lowest level of escalation"<sup>7</sup>

This role of the light infantry division as a pre-emptive deployment capability rather than a war winning force is most clearly captured in the view of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth:

"Rapid deployment to a crisis area may well preclude the later necessity for a larger, more costly force. Further, the division's small size permits quick extraction, facilitating rapid restoration of a peaceful environment in the crisis area."<sup>8</sup>

#### AUSTRALIAN FORCE STRUCTURE

The Australian Army tradition could be said to be one of light forces. Certainly, in both world wars the initial Australian contribution consisted of light infantry or cavalry formations, which were largely dependent on higher allied echelons for the provision of heavy combat support and logistics. In each case these forces became heavier as the wars progressed and leaders came to terms with the grim reality that flair and initiative could not totally compensate for an increasing international commitment to machine warfare.

During World War 2 the real prospect of an invasion of the continent for the first time drew the nation towards the establishment of heavier forces, such as an armoured division, which was a case of too little too late given the perceptions of the time. These perceptions quickly passed however, and heavier forces became increasingly less relevant to the actual fighting which took place against the shrinking Japanese threat in the dense, wet jungles of New Guinea and Borneo.

A resurgence of Defense interest at the height of the Cold War in the early 1950s resulted in an Australian commitment to a comprehensive force structure capable of fighting alongside allies in conventional operations in Asia and one which, if developed to fruition, would have given Australia a significant improvement in self reliance for continental defense. In this regard, considerable benefit was gained from the extensive residue of equipment and industrial infrastructure left over from World War 2, as well as from the experienced political and

military leadership generated by this conflict.

Since that time Australia's participation in conflicts in her region has been primarily confined to the use of light forces in low intensity, counter insurgency situations in Malaya, Malaysia and Vietnam. In the latter case, heavier forces were found to be necessary, and, with the exception of the introduction of Australian armoured units, this heavy support was provided by the United States, thus shielding the Australian public from the full cost, and therefore, a full commitment to, an alliance strategy in Asia.

Following the enunciation of the Guam, or Nixon Doctrine in 1969-70, in which greater regional responsibility for self defense was proposed by the United States Administration, Australia has drifted towards a concept of self reliant continental defense which is now taking on the characteristics of a close-in maritime strategy, if such a thing is possible. Bouyed by the relative success of Argentine air forces in the maritime strike role during the Falklands conflicts, and based on the conviction that policy makers will be able and willing to generate a timely response to the development of future invasion threats, Australia is displaying an increasing willingness to forego the maintenance of heavier land and naval forces.

The contradiction between this trend and Australian protestations of greater regional interest and involvement has not escaped controversy. While the region is relatively stable now, there are powerful demographic and social forces at work which may be difficult to control in the not too distant future.

Economic aid may assist in ameliorating these trends while relations in the region continue to mature, but the risk of a deterioration of the situation with a subsequent growth of ideological dispute and superpower involvement is always present. A decision to forego the capabilities needed for involvement in any military dispute is a decision to forego a significant instrument of influence on the approaches to continental Australia.

With regard to the case made earlier in this essay for flexibility and adaptability in a defense force, it is appropriate at this point to make the assertion that defense capabilities and the national military ethos transcend the foreign and economic policies of individual governments for the very good reason that these are often based on transitory perceptions or misperceptions of relative needs, interests and strengths. The introduction of less benign influences into Australia's present highly favourable strategic environment could occur and could change these perceptions at a rate which could not be matched by changes in capabilities.

Returning to the question of light forces in the defense of Australia, as outlined in a previous section of this essay, Australia's region of interest includes extensive areas of the close terrain for which the light forces are most suited. Additionally, the requirement for high strategic mobility and a capacity to conduct pre-emptive deployments against threats from lightly equipped insurgents or conventional forces favours the maintenance of a light force capability for some contingencies.

Nevertheless, most of Australia itself is open terrain, unsuited for the use of light forces, either by an aggressor or by a defender. There is little purpose, and therefore little likelihood that an enemy would employ light forces in the Australian north, unless it was specifically for the purpose of reconnaissance or to draw off forces from more important objectives elsewhere.

An argument against this assessment would be that no enemy would attempt to invade with heavier forces given a strong early warning system and maritime strike capability on the part of the Australian Airforce. This is probably equally true and is all the more reason for developing capabilities which can be used to deny a steady build-up of air and maritime capabilities on the near approaches for the purpose of suppressing or outflanking these air forces. That aside, there is no reason to expect that an Australian response to the use of light forces against her sovereign territory would be confined to purely defensive measures.

These undeveloped assertions are made to highlight the need to be able to generate a wide range of possible responses to future contingencies in Australia's region. The close-in maritime strategy for continental defense is a strategy before the event which contains a Maginot element to it, to put not too emotive a point on it. Its deterrent value is limited to Australia in its present circumstances-it does nothing for the region in which the real changes to those circumstances will be wrought.

Without doubt Australia has a need for light, highly deployable forces for surveillance, pre-emptive deployment and counter insurgency roles. In the present climate a portion of these should have special forces characteristics. The greater the combat power of such forces the more useful and dominant in the force structure they should become. However, there should be few illusions about the capacity of light forces, given the present technology, to fight decisive conventional battles.

The question remains, will the Australian Army ever have to fight decisive conventional battles? The answer is, probably not- provided it has the capacity to fight them. An unwillingness and an inability to engage in combat with heavy forces in Australia's region is the most likely guarantee that such forces will be raised against her and her neighbours.

#### CONCLUSION

The underlying theme to this essay has been that there is much more required of an army than the capabilities deemed necessary for the threats of the moment. Difficult as it may be for some to accept, the use, or potential use of the military as an instrument of national power pervades all areas of international and domestic policy. If a nation is relatively weak in certain capabilities its power to influence affairs in the areas where those capabilities could impact is commensurately reduced.

A fine line exists between having too much military power and too little-both from the domestic impact of cost, and international perceptions. The preferred situation would appear to be to have the least necessary for more immediate contingencies, while being able to acquire more in the shortest possible time. This approach has good deterrent potential while reducing cost as well as a nation's military profile.

The balance therefore between readiness forces and those required to provide an adequate base for expansion inevitably fluctuates on the very subjective question of warning time. In Australia's present strategic climate this question, while important to the military, is not a political issue upon which governments will founder. For this reason there is a continuous struggle to retain capabilities essential for the modern battlefield which are difficult to acquire in short lead times, but for which there is no readily apparent short term need.

As this essay has argued, there is a place for light ground forces on the modern battlefield and in the Australian inventory of instruments of power. While their employment before serious conflict begins may be strategically useful, it is unlikely that their presence would be decisive once relations were reduced to war of any form. Given the historical record of strategic surprise, a prudent course for Australia to follow would appear to be the development and maintenance of a heavier, advanced technology expansion base from which units capable of waging high intensity combat can be drawn for future emergencies



## ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 99.
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5. FC 100-1, "The Army of Excellence", US Army Combined Arms Combat Development Activity, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, September 1984. p. 2-1.
6. Wickham, John A., Jr. "Light Infantry Divisions in Defense of Europe" in NATOs Sixteen Nations, Vol 30, No 1, 1985. pp. 105-6.
7. Ibid., p. 100.
8. FC 100-1, p. 2-1

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