

SEMAPHORE

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OPERATION ASTUTE – THE RAN IN EAST TIMOR

Operation ASTUTE, the ADF's recent deployment of 'troops to bring security, peace and confidence to the people of Timor-Leste',¹ has been accompanied by the expected flood of media analysis. With some 1300 soldiers once more facing a challenging mission on foreign soil, the tendency has been to focus on the land-force contribution because, as one columnist put it, 'Whatever we do and wherever we do it the army is almost certain to be playing the central role'.² The danger associated with such themes is the often explicit dismissal of the force-enabling role played by other ADF capabilities. 'Our high-tech weaponry is useless in these [asymmetric warfare] situations', another writer opined, 'when the key to victory is boots on the ground'.³

Oversimplifications and misrepresentations such as these do nothing to enhance our understanding of current operational experience and little to address future security concerns. Regrettably, too few analysts comprehend that a credible ADF must necessarily be a flexible, balanced joint force. That is, one in which the integrated capabilities of the three Services work together to provide operational synergy. Moreover, rather than structuring to meet a particular set of circumstances, the ADF must be sufficiently versatile to respond effectively across a wide spectrum of operations, at times preparing for threat levels which may ultimately never eventuate. Deterrence, after all, is far preferable to victory on an Australian battlefield.

This is not to suggest that the ADF can have it all: a limited budget must always be prioritised. But it is here that cost-effectiveness comes into play, and given the long lead times and service lives of modern defence hardware, it would be wise to procure inherently flexible assets. The propensity of some defence commentators to advance a few narrowly focused capabilities at the total expense of others carries the risk of strategic irrelevance, as the security climate inevitably changes. Such proposals would also upset the ADF's ability to apply credible power across a range of contingencies. Any increase to the size of a modern Army, for example, brings with it the need to add joint force enabling capabilities in order to provide support and protection when deployed. Operation ASTUTE offers a salutary lesson in this context because, despite the ongoing media commentary, it began and continued as a joint operation and while publicised as a 'troop deployment', was in fact a text book example of littoral maritime power projection.⁴

It is food for thought that the land forces were not simply assisted by naval elements during ASTUTE, but at a fundamental level relied upon the many and varied capabilities brought by one of the largest RAN task groups operationally deployed since World War II. Involving five major and three minor fleet units, ASTUTE's initial force allocation was only slightly less than the number of warships assigned to the 1999 INTERFET (International

Force East Timor) deployment, Operation STABILISE. In view of the planned acquisition of two large amphibious ships of the *Canberra* class from 2012, it is especially noteworthy that ASTUTE witnessed the first operational deployment of the ADF's Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), comprising the amphibious transports HMA Ships *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*, and heavy landing ship HMAS *Tobruk*. Acting together these units established an Army Battalion group ashore within three days. Using either of the designs currently proposed for the *Canberra* class, a similar sized expedition could be transported in a single lift and landed in a matter of hours.



The Amphibious Ready Group off Dili, May 2006 (RAN)

The call for help from the government of Timor-Leste came on 24 May and crucial to Australia's rapid reaction was the readiness of the ADF's maritime assets and the effectiveness of individual and collective training regimes. Sailing from Darwin early on 25 May, *Kanimbla* was first diverted to the south coast of Timor, where she provided facilities to four Army helicopters unable to reach Dili due to poor weather. She entered Dili Harbour late on 26 May with an operational Primary Casualty Reception Facility, staff essential to initial operations, and priority military and humanitarian aid stores. Soon following *Kanimbla* into Dili were *Manoora* and *Tobruk*, which had sailed from Townsville on 24 May. Each carried several hundred troops and their equipment together with armoured personnel carriers and associated support vehicles.

The chaotic environment ashore required the land forces to be disembarked in a high state of tactical readiness, and with Dili port facilities unsecured this relied entirely on the over-the-beach capabilities provided by the ARG and its embarked helicopters. *Manoora*, for example, carried four Black Hawks in addition to a Sea King, and these conducted an air assault on 28 May. She also had on board a Deployable Geo-spatial Support Team which surveyed the landing sites prior to the amphibious assault conducted by hard-worked RAN heavy landing craft (HMA Ships *Balikpapan*, *Tarakan*, *Labuan* and later *Wewak*) and Army LCM8s. Some of these smaller units will likely remain until the ADF's final withdrawal for, as has been demonstrated time and again within our region's



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underdeveloped operational environments, scope for manoeuvre ashore can be highly constrained. The corollary is that an amphibious capability to provide inter- and intra-theatre lift is a vital enabler of land operations.

Furthermore, no military operation can be sustained without the necessary accompanying infrastructure. The Army Company group first deployed to East Timor by C-130 late on 25 May did not have the luxury of a prolonged build-up to create a base from which to operate, achieve operational mass and establish appropriate support mechanisms. The ARG not only brought these essential heavier and second level forces into theatre, but also offered an immediately functioning offshore base, thereby allowing the force ashore to maximise its effectiveness while minimising its footprint. Support roles are intrinsic to the design of amphibious ships and in addition to functioning as a large heliport, fuel dump and hospital, the ARG acted or could potentially have served as a communications centre, hotel, food service centre, port security force, and supply depot for items as diverse as toilet paper, clothing and ammunition.

However, the amphibious and logistic enabling activities of the ARG only touch on the totality of the naval role during ASTUTE's early phases. One of the critical naval tasks during Operation STABILISE in 1999 was to provide presence, and the RAN deployed several major surface combatants to ensure the area was safe during INTERFET's initial insertion. That the threat was of a different scale and nature in May 2006 did not lessen the importance of advance force operations,⁵ particularly since naval units operated in a dimension that potential antagonists were unable to oppose. As the Vice Chief of the Defence Force flew into Dili airport with the first troops, the FFG HMAS *Adelaide* appeared over the horizon.⁶ While tasked for border protection under Operation RELEX II, the frigate had been simultaneously poised ready to assist off East Timor, offering a range of combat, surveillance, command and control and aviation capabilities. The ADF had 'to go in there with plenty of combat power', noted the Chief of the Defence Force, [and] 'demonstrate that we have very good capability'. *Adelaide*, he continued, was 'a very handy asset to have...and of course as we all know, when a naval ship steams into port, it does have an effect that is good to creating a stable environment'.⁷

Allowing sustainment of the naval presence and adding her own not inconsiderable bulk was the replenishment ship, HMAS *Success*. Joining *Adelaide* on a patrol line close off Dili Harbour at dawn on 26 May, the highly visible and professional appearance of the two warships had a significant impact on perceptions ashore. Indeed, during the critical early hours, before sufficient troops were available to deploy throughout Dili, high-end maritime combat capabilities combined with the inherent mobility of warships went far towards making the Australian presence seem ubiquitous. The overt naval presence also brought a measure of reassurance to the few Australian forces then in Dili; should the situation have become untenable, then an emergency extraction would not have been possible without the presence of the maritime component.

With the ARG's arrival *Adelaide's* mission shifted to providing cover,⁸ but by 28 May the security situation had clarified to the extent that it no longer warranted her

presence. Testament to the ability of warships to successfully conduct wide-ranging activities over vast distances with little or no notice, *Adelaide* returned to her previous RELEX tasking, while *Success* was soon in the South China Sea replenishing a US Navy task group proceeding to provide humanitarian aid to the victims of an earthquake in Java. As her commanding officer related, in a matter of six days *Success*, 'had transited from one side of Borneo to the other. In between the ship conducted 'gun boat diplomacy' off one country in support of law and order and was then able to support another nation's aid efforts to yet a third nation'.⁹

Forecasting future global trends in an unpredictable world is an inherently uncertain process, but experience suggests that strategic choices should never be absolute. Recent operations in East Timor, the Solomons, Indonesia and Iraq have routinely illustrated the multifaceted tasks which navies perform in the littoral environment. In all these commitments amphibious units have played a vital part, yet only 16 years ago official policy dismissed these assets as 'inappropriate for Australia's force structure'.¹⁰

As Professor Andrew Lambert argued at a recent SPC-A conference, our greatest danger is to allow the impulses of today to become an excuse not to think: 'Narrow prescriptionist approaches to national strategy do not work. Wise nations know their interests, and are prepared to defend them.'¹¹ Australia is a maritime nation, and as 'the littoral accommodates over three quarters of the world's population, hosts over 80% of the world's capital cities and nearly all of the marketplaces for international trade',¹² only rarely will securing our national interests not involve a maritime dimension. Operating in an increasingly complex and at times more dangerous environment, the ADF must maintain its ability to credibly function and flexibly use its equipment at short notice. To argue that any one or other ADF capability 'is the single most important' or more 'central' than others, is to misunderstand the interdependency of joint operations, and to put the effectiveness of those operations at risk.

¹ Department of Defence, Operation ASTUTE web page, Internet <defence.gov.au/opastute/> (viewed 31 May 2006).

² G. Sheridan, 'We need soldiers and more firepower', *The Australian*, 25 May 2006.

³ N. Stuart, 'Stretching our forces too tightly is not the way to win the peace', *The Canberra Times*, 6 June 2006.

⁴ Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine (AMD)*, DPS, Canberra, 2000, p. 156. Maritime power projection is defined as: 'The ability to project, sustain and apply effective military force from the sea in order to influence events on land.'

⁵ *AMD*, p. 60: 'Advance force operations are conducted in advance of a main force, notably an amphibious force, in order to make acceptably safe the area in which the latter will operate.'

⁶ VCDF Doorstop Interview, 27 May 2006, Internet <defence.gov.au/opastute/> (viewed 31 May 2006).

⁷ CDF Media Briefing: 'Update on Op ASTUTE', 26 May 2006, Internet <defence.gov.au/opastute/> (viewed 31 May 2006).

⁸ *AMD*, p. 56. Cover is 'the provision of support for less capable forces to ensure their protection and the completion of their tasking without interference from an adversary.'

⁹ HMAS *Success*, Report of Proceedings, May 2006.

¹⁰ D. Stevens (ed.), *The Royal Australian Navy*, OUP, Melbourne, 2001, p. 261.

¹¹ Professor A. Lambert, 'Sea power ashore and in the air', presentation to the King-Hall Naval History Conference, Canberra, 21 July 2005.

¹² A. Tewes, et al., *A Foundation Paper on Australia's Maritime Strategy*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2002, p. 16.

