

AN EFFECTIVE NATIONAL DEFENCE

Despite changing threats, the fundamentals of Australia's defence policy have remained remarkably consistent over the last century. Australia's strategic geography and our reliance on sea trade have always counted for much when deciding how best to defend our sovereign territory, our people and our interests. Not surprisingly, intensive study of historical and contemporary security issues continues to confirm the enduring relevance of an essentially maritime strategy to an effective national defence.

More than twenty years ago, the direction of Australian defence policy seemed far less certain than it is today. With the Cold War waning, the nation faced no identifiable direct military danger. It followed that security planning should be focused on lower-level contingencies, but the Defence community was plagued by adversarial attitudes and could not agree on the appropriate level of threat against which to structure the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Tacitly acknowledging the deficiencies existing within his policy-making machinery, and assessing that strategic planning and force structure needed a fundamental rethink, the then Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, initiated a review of defence capabilities by an external consultant, Paul Dibb.

Released in March 1986, the Dibb Review placed a gratifying emphasis on maritime issues, but demonstrated some fundamental misunderstandings of the nature of maritime operations. This was particularly evident in the Review's focus on a strategy of 'denial' in the sea-air gap to our north, which from the Navy's perspective was isolationist, neither acknowledging Australia's regional responsibilities nor providing a strategy for the peacetime employment of the ADF. As the then Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral (later Admiral) Mike Hudson, RAN, commented, 'in my view it is a narrow, inward looking strategy which surrenders the initiative and unnecessarily restricts a government's political options'.¹

The Dibb Review nevertheless provided a catalyst for discussion in the lead-up to the 1987 Defence White Paper, and Hudson made sure that the Navy's case was adequately presented. An article published in *Navy News* in May 1986 provided a useful summary of this position and it is still worth revisiting, as much of what Hudson wrote remains relevant today.²

There has been much talk lately that tomorrow's RAN will become more a coastguard than a navy. I can assure you that this is far from accurate. Rumours of drastic cuts in numbers of major warships are just that - rumours, with no basis in fact. The reports you have seen in the press, predicting further reductions in the Navy, should be taken with a bag of salt. As I see it, such speculation makes two basic assumptions. The first is that Australia is committed to a policy of 'Continental Defence'; that is, that our defence forces will respond only to direct military threats against the Australian mainland. The second assumption is that surface warships, other than patrol and mine counter-measures vessels, perform few useful tasks in the 'missile era' and are in any case, too vulnerable and

expensive. Submarines and aircraft will be enough to deny use of the sea to an enemy. Neither of these assumptions is correct.



Admiral Michael Hudson, AC, RAN (1933-2005) (RAN)

Security

First a few words about that misleading term 'Continental Defence', or 'Fortress Australia'. It completely ignores a basic fact of geography - Australia is an island, with no land borders. Our common border with neighbouring countries is the sea, which also forms the common link between these island states. It is the major regional source (sometimes, the only source) of both food and cash income. Australia relies upon sea transport for over 80 per cent of our export earnings, for most of our imports and for transport of bulk goods around our coastline, especially to and from remote areas in the north. The rise and fall of the Australian dollar, depending on each month's trade figures, shows how much Australia depends upon overseas trade for its national livelihood. Imagine what would happen if that trade were somehow disrupted. We would not starve to death, but the nation would soon be in a very poor economic shape, as our foreign earnings dried up. This could happen without an enemy ever having to set foot on our shores.

In Parliament recently, our Minister firmly stated that the Government will aim for a self-reliant defence strategy, but will have nothing to do with an isolationist 'Fortress Australia' policy. In short, Australia must take more responsibility for its own security, and for preserving peace and stability within our own region of interest. That 'region of interest' includes Southeast Asia, the Southwest Pacific (including Papua New Guinea), and large parts of the Indian and Southern Oceans. Our Navy will continue

to play a major role in advancing Australia's interests in the oceanic region.

Surface Forces

Patrol boats, and mine-hunters and sweepers are essential for protection of our coastal areas and ports, but they are specialised ships which are not easily adapted for other tasks. They do not have the seakeeping and endurance qualities necessary to operate over the vast distances of our region. Submarines and aircraft are excellent deterrent weapons, but are of limited use in situations where a lower level of force, and a visible display of power are required. Communications are also not as reliable as with surface units. Aircraft have limited ranges and endurance, and are not always available.

The long range and endurance of surface forces, their impressive appearance, and wide variety of weapons and sensors, including the use of helicopters, make them perfectly suited to extending influence throughout an oceanic region. Ships are also a visible demonstration of Australian skills and technology. Warship visits to friendly countries demonstrate Australia's interest and commitment in their welfare and security, besides showing that we can actually get there and stay there if needed. As they are self-sufficient, ships do not require local base facilities, as would troops or aircraft. They can come and go as they, and the host country, please.

In times of tension, surface forces are in constant touch with their home command, greatly reducing the chance of excessive use of force and escalation of conflicts. Particularly when operating as a group, major surface warships are capable of defending themselves against air, surface and sub-surface threats, besides deploying a wide range of offensive capabilities themselves. All in all there is no other vehicle so versatile, in peace or war, as the surface warship.

Vulnerability

All forces deployed in a conflict, at whatever level, are naturally at risk - that is part of the business. Claims that our ships, alone amongst all others it seems, are powerless in the face of anti-ship missiles, overlook the evidence of the modern experience. I recall arguments that surface-to-air missiles had spelt the end of manned aircraft, or that anti-tank missiles had dealt armoured land forces a death blow. There is no sign of either aircraft or armoured vehicles being disposed of by those who have need of them; they have simply been improved to deal with the improved threats. The same applies to our surface ships. Besides progressively improving our anti-missile defences and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, it should not be forgotten that our ships themselves have potent anti-ship systems, which are among the most advanced in the world. The problems of modern warfare are, then, no different from in times gone by: having well-trained men [and women], well-maintained equipment and being able to deploy the right forces in the right place at the right time.

Balance

Just as the Defence Force needs to strike a balance of maritime, land and air forces, so the Navy needs to develop a balanced range of capabilities. As a modern example, the Soviet Navy, which pioneered the anti-ship missile, has a huge naval air force and the world's largest

submarine fleet, but it still continues to expand its fleet of modern long-range surface warships. Admiral of the Fleet SG Gorshkov commanded the Soviet Navy from 1956 to 1985. When he took over, his surface forces were intended mostly for coastal defence, as 'the Soviet Union did not show confidence in the role and place of surface ships at sea'. However, Gorshkov soon came to some different conclusions. Among them were: 'The experience of combat operations at sea in the First and Second World Wars confirmed the need to move over to the building of balanced fleets'; and that, without more capable surface ships, 'the solution of a number of tasks facing the fleet is impossible'. I agree with him, and I have met few experienced naval men who don't. A look at Jane's Fighting Ships will confirm that nations the world over are convinced of the value of capable surface ships.

Admiral Hudson could take much of the credit for the manner in which the 1987 White Paper subsequently dealt with maritime defence issues. It explicitly rejected the concept of 'continental' defence and exchanged 'denial' for the more flexible layered strategy of 'defence in depth'. Moreover, it acknowledged that 'By its very nature, the defence of Australia and its territories emphasise maritime warfare capabilities.'³ This was matched by the delineation of a well-balanced range of naval capabilities which, in addition to submarines and mine hunters, described a surface combatant force comprising high capability destroyers, lesser capability frigates and patrol boats for coastal operations. As Hudson correctly predicted in the conclusion to his May 1986 article, such a force structure was realistic with respect to assessed needs and financially achievable.

Twenty two years later, the 2009 Defence White Paper has more similarities with the 1987 version than might be expected.⁴ The future Navy will operate three Air Warfare Destroyers performing high threat tasks, eight Future Frigates replacing the current Anzac class frigates, and around 20 Offshore Combatant Vessels, larger than the existing Armidale class boats, will undertake wide-ranging coastal tasks including littoral warfighting. As always, each new design will incorporate enhanced technologies, possibly some that have yet to reach the concept stage. By thus evolving and keeping pace with emerging threats, these ships will remain capable of protecting our national interests throughout their service lives.

Over the last two decades, the wisdom of the balanced approach to navy capability planning has been a clear success story. The flexible force structure envisaged in 1986 has worked exceedingly well in unforeseen circumstances across the globe and for varied tasks ranging from humanitarian assistance to actual war. The late Admiral Hudson would no doubt be pleased to see that in 2009 his ideas have passed the test of time.

1 Cited in *The Royal Australian Navy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 242.

2 Michael Hudson, 'An Effective National Defence', *Navy News*, May 2, 1986, p. 3.

3 Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, Canberra, 1987, p. 43.

4 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Canberra, 2009.

