



## Seeing Red: the critical capability of Institutional Agility

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# Tac Talks

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## Introduction

"Two companies of paratroopers from the fictional nation of KAMARIA invade Australia's Northern Territory under cover of darkness. A flotilla of warships - including two United States vessels - steam into ``battle" in the Timor Sea [...] Australia's biggest military exercise since World War II - is underway."<sup>1</sup>



**'Kamarian Paratroopers' represented by Operators from the USAF 320th Special Tactics Squadron, prepare to jump into the Shoalwater Bay Training Area during TALISMAN SABRE 2017.**

This is *not* Exercise Talisman Sabre 2017; this is an excerpt from a newspaper covering its predecessor, *Exercise Kangaroo*, in 1989. The Australian Defence Force has been fighting the fictional Kamarians, in their many forms, for over thirty years, very much since it was envisioned as a 'joint' force. As a Naval Intelligence Officer, I have participated in numerous exercises against the Kamarian threat. It would appear that we are very effective at consistently and decisively defeating them. How effective, however, is the Kamarian threat at preparing us for more likely real-world contingencies?

This question came to me while I was examining the force structures of regional militaries. I was reminded that the entire force structure of some navies had been developed with *their potential adversaries' front of mind*. A sophisticated level of analysis and assessment on 'blue' had taken place, one that had guided the composition and characteristics of the naval force over a period of many decades.

My train of thought led to the logical follow on the question of whether the Royal Australian Navy had oriented its force structure or warfighting with a particular threat in mind. The answer was not immediately clear. We have a very modern, networked, expeditionary oriented Navy, capable of integrating with our Allies and defending itself against a wide variety of threats. *Lethality* and *interoperability* are two defining characteristics of our force structure.

Perhaps one of the key reasons that our force is aligned in this way is because historically we have not often had the luxury of having a single adversary from which to model our force structure. The Navy's threat landscape is diverse and in a constant state of flux. Our warfighting professionals are expected to conduct operations over a vast range of theatres, spreading from the Middle East to the South-West Pacific. The potential adversaries that we may face in these environments are numerous and are capable of operating on various levels, across a broad

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spectrum of military operations. They understand their operating environment better than we do and will seek to exploit it in unique and contrasting ways.

The methods of warfare that the RAN may feasibly employ in these areas vary considerably. In some, we may be asked to conduct humanitarian aid, with force protection considerations. In others, we may be asked to ensure secure passage of merchant vessels through areas of maritime security concern. We may have to conduct both high and low spectrum operations, whilst simultaneously operating under the spectre of chemical, biological and nuclear threats. Considering all of these factors, I would argue that the critical capability required for our Navy to survive the challenges of the future would not be our technology, but our *institutional agility*. This is essentially our ability to rapidly and effectively respond to any contingency at short notice and sustain our effort for long periods in non-permissive environments. On the tactical level, we can rapidly transform our posture and procedures to exploit the vulnerabilities of the adversary and the characteristics of the environment. Throughout our history, we have demonstrated both an aptitude for, and the necessity of, institutional agility by responding effectively to numerous strategic challenges. In 1990 HMA Ships *Adelaide*, *Darwin* and *Success* deployed to the Middle East Region with three days' notice following their shakedown. This is just one example of many occasions Navy-Warfighters have had to rapidly and effectively respond to short-notice contingencies.

Since this time, the threat landscape has continued to evolve, with many of our potential adversaries now possessing clear advantages. Many operate with a lower sensitivity to safety and risk. They require lower fidelity targeting solutions and adopt rules of engagement that are more offensive. They have supersonic cruise missiles, which out-range ours. They are prepared to sacrifice capability to achieve their objectives. Their information warfare campaigns are sophisticated. They know that our 'Phase 0,' is about understanding the adversary, so they focus their 'Phase 0' on creating uncertainty. They employ un-attributable methods using unaffiliated units. They attempt to infiltrate, disrupt and deny our networks. The accumulated result of all of these factors is that these potential adversaries may well be capable of making high consequence decisions *faster* than we do. Considering that the nature of the threat in our major exercises has not significantly changed, our institutional agility may have atrophied in relative terms compared to this adversary.

So what does an *institutionally agile* Navy, capable of achieving decision superiority over these adversaries, look like? Well, it is a force with clear and widely understood contingencies. Its leaders have a detailed understanding of who they may be called upon to fight at short notice and where. Its frontline decision-makers have sufficient access to develop a detailed understanding of the human, meteorological, physical and oceanographic terrain of that environment at short notice. They also possess a system, rather than a platform based understanding of the threat. Finally and perhaps most importantly, individual units understand how 'blue' and 'green' forces will likely impact the adversary in a particular contingency and where opportunities may exist for their units to integrate, de-conflict and enhance those effects.

Consistently practising fighting against the same fictional threats with an assumed doctrine in an unlikely operating environment may no longer be sufficient for the Navy War-Fighter. Our exercises must be planned with the goal of supporting a sophisticated understanding of our real-world potential adversaries. One can only look so far at the broad spectrum of capabilities and vulnerabilities of the numerous export variants of the Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine as an example. All are employed remarkably differently, depending on proficiency, reliability, upgrades and the operating environment. The implications of this knowledge affect the way we choose to orient our force to best achieve our mission.

There are several other ways that we can effectively achieve this desired level of institutional agility. One option is by enhancing our simulation, table-topping and war gaming capabilities by investing significant time and effort to create contemporary and realistic warfare scenarios. It does not have to be expensive - there is open-source driven, relatively cheap, desktop software

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commercially available, which may well meet our requirements. We could certainly accelerate the generation of these scenarios by seeking out and exploiting tacit knowledge within our alliance networks. Another method is to further transform our existing exercise scenarios, which are currently aligned to Kamaria, to reflect real-world contingencies. Certainly, elements of simulation could be combined with these exercises to achieve some of the more capable threat profiles. On completion, we capture the relevant observations and we prepare for the next exercise; a *different* contingency in an entirely separate operating environment.

The potential implications and benefits of strengthened institutional agility are immense. As each exercise progresses and contingencies are re-visited, the level of knowledge of the operating environment and adversary is more enhanced. Imagine the utility of an adversary 'manual', for example, where both operations and intelligence staff fuse threat assessments with war-fighting tactics. This could be kept up to date through open access to the Navy warfighter community. The product would be bespoke to surface and sub-surface platforms and used by ops-teams to rapidly develop mission-specific context. *That is real lethality.*

We already have the platforms, the systems and the access, we just need to execute. I look forward to a time when 'blue' can accurately play 'red' with a stake in winning. If they figure out a way to get the drop on us, *we should let them.* Failure is success if we learn from it.

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<sup>1</sup> David Clarke Scott, 'Military Exercises Test Australia's Self Reliance', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 August 1989

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