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Implications for the Royal Australian Navy of the Second World War in Australia's Region

Introduction

In the Second World War the Japanese took one-sixth of the world's surface in a little over six months with comparatively modest forces. Central to this economy of force was their mastery of archipelagic warfare, which confounded the allies initially, but ultimately the fragility of Japanese grand and military strategy proved fatal. For Australia there is more to be learned from the Japanese offensive than the Allied counteroffensive, as its scale and force densities were closer to those of today and Japan was the weaker protagonist, as Australia might be in a future conflict. Furthermore, Japan, like Australia, depended on sea communication. The essay will examine what happened in the war, what lessons arose, what has changed and, finally, the implications for the RAN.

It is framed on the assumption that in future it may not be in America's interest to intervene on Australia's behalf¹ therefore Australia must be prepared to defend its own sovereignty as far as possible. It avoids specific force structure prescriptions but aims instead to identify the strategic level lessons for the RAN upon which future concepts, force posture and force structure must be founded.

What Occurred?

Japan, concerned about secure access to oil, settled on a plan to seize the oilfields of Malaya, Burma and the Dutch East Indies. This would result in war against materially stronger opponents.² Japanese strategy was employ surprise and speed to take the oil producing areas after which they anticipated the US fleet would advance across the pacific seeking decisive battle. The Japanese would establish a bastion of island bases, from which they would erode the US Fleet using island and carrier-based aircraft and submarines, before a defeating its remnants in the decisive fleet battle.³ The campaign would start with simultaneous surprise blows against the European and American colonial powers.

Documentaries visualise the offensive as a tide spreading from north to south. In reality it was geographically sequential, but more like a series of near concurrent spot fires erupting in the Allied rear. Rabaul and Ambon were taken before Singapore was assaulted, Palembang before Singapore fell and Darwin was bombed just four days later.

24 January - Rabaul taken
 30 January – Ambon landings
 3 February – Ambon secured
 8 February – Singapore assaulted
 12 February – Palembang falls
 15 February – Singapore falls
 18 February –Bali landings
 19 February – Darwin bombed
 20 February – Timor landings

¹ H. White, *How to Defend Australia* (LaTrobe University Press, 2019), 7-17.

² D.C Evans and M.R Peattie, *Kaigun. Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy 1887-1941* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1997), 209.

³ *Ibid*, 495.

Japanese success depended on air superiority. The Navy had fewer than four hundred serviceable Zero fighters,⁴ yet they generated air superiority at will. Many Naval aircraft were carrier-based but they also took airfields sea deep into enemy territory, so could concentrate combined land and sea-based airpower. This highlights three of the most important characteristics of archipelagic warfare. Firstly, unlike land warfare, archipelagic warfare need not be geographically sequential. Secondly, the only land that matters is that which affects war at sea. Thirdly, this demands an *integrated* archipelagic campaign. In contrast, Australia archipelagic defence was poorly integrated. The Army garrisoned key islands but RAAF commitment was limited because of concern over the Navy's ability to supply fuel and soon withdrawn, thus the garrisons proved liabilities.⁵

The Battle of Midway deprived Japan of four of her six fleet carriers. Losses among highly trained naval aircrew were irreplaceable. Subsequently the Navy relied increasingly on land based airpower, but had lost the freedom to shift supply between airfields. Japanese defence was stubborn but lacked the élan, economy and tight coordination of their offensive. They failed to prioritise protecting internal sea lines of communication within their bastion, prioritising attacking US military assets instead, which is ironic considering vulnerability to commerce interdiction was the reason she went to war.

The bastion was permeable to US submarines which eventually destroyed much of the Japanese merchant fleet. US air dropped mines also proved effective at closing key Japanese ports for critical time windows. Consequently, Japanese forces suffered worsening shortages of fuel, degrading their ability to concentrate force. Furthermore, they frequently held back powerful elements of the fleet for the anticipated decisive battle.⁶

The three-year-long Allied counteroffensive was attritional and reliant on material preponderance, therefore contains fewer lessons for resource constrained Australia.

What Were the Lessons?

It is often assumed that Japan, materially weaker than her opponents, could never have won,⁷ but the same logic says North Vietnam could never have defeated the United States. Ho Chi Minh recognised that American public opinion was the centre of gravity⁸ therefore sought a political decision whereas Imperial Japan sought a purely military decision. The first lesson then is that weaker powers must employ an asymmetric grand strategy to which military strategy is subordinated. If Japan could have played the liberating anti-colonialist role better to US public opinion, it is just conceivable that its military strategy could have made the grand strategy work. A divided USA is a very different opponent to a united one. In seeking short-term military advantage at Pearl Harbor, Japan mobilised American patriotic fervour more successfully than the US Government could have, condemning itself to an unequal war. Bushido culture ensured the relationship between Japanese grand strategy and military strategy was inverted, leading to an unattainable strategy.

⁴ For comparison, the Luftwaffe destroyed 1,489 Russian aircraft on the opening day of Operation Barbarossa.

⁵ Michael Evans, *Lessons from the Ambon Disaster of 1942*. (Land Warfare Studies Centre 2000), 30.

⁶ David Stevens, *The Naval Campaigns for New Guinea*, (Journal of the Australian War Memorial. Edition 34. 2001) 25

⁷ R. Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, (Pimlico 1995), 1

⁸ Clausewitz said the centre of gravity is "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends". National doctrines vary.

Japan also lacked unity of purpose. The Navy's sought to secure the oil supplies to the South, whereas the Army sought expansion in China. No one was in overall charge and priorities between the competing theatres were never coordinated.

At the operational level, Japanese success arose from coordinating sea, land and air power in integrated archipelagic warfare. Airpower could dominate surface forces but much of it depended on land bases. These had to be taken from the sea and likewise supplied. Sea control depended on airpower, completing the triangle of interdependence. The relationship between carrier and land-based airpower was essentially mobility versus resilience. Early in the war, when most archipelagic airfields were weakly defended, land-based airpower could be strategically quite mobile. Later, once land force densities increased, rapid mobility of air power on a significant scale could only be provided by carriers which could advance and retire and concentrate and disperse as required. Immobile Japanese archipelagic land bases were often crippled by US submarines and mines at places and times critical to forthcoming battles. Coordinating all these relationships to win the contest to seek and find, evade and deceive and strike and bypass is the essence of archipelagic warfare.

What remains and what has changed?

History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes.⁹ Populations, littoral urbanisation, social interconnectivity and surveillance have all increased. Indonesia and China have replaced Imperial Japan as Australia's most likely potential opponents.¹⁰ China's approach routes to Australia are similar to Imperial Japan's, whereas Indonesia lies directly across Australia's main lines of communication. The region remains essentially archipelagic, so the triangle of interdependence still broadly applies, but anti-access and area denial technology (A2AD) has reduced the need for large, resource-intensive, easily found airfields. Even small islands can hide threats to maritime and air forces. Exploitation of archipelagic islands to dominate the sea is now easier for a force capable of dispersed small scale amphibious operations.

Furthermore, the character of conflict has changed since 1945. In the post-Westphalian "Western" conception, an enemy was defeated once his military centre of gravity collapsed. In ancient Chinese conception the opponent's mind was the centre of gravity; he was defeated when he perceived it so. His mind could be manipulated by means other than war to induce defeat. According to Confucian philosophy this contest occurs on two levels - morality and power.¹¹ Each side attempts to convince key audiences of the rightness of its position (morality) and of the cost and benefits of support or opposition (power). The Chinese Communist Party's highest priority is its continuing rule; therefore its narrative is prioritised for domestic audiences. It emphasises its power and righteousness in reclaiming Chinese dignity and purportedly ancient maritime territory within the "Nine-Dash Line".

Chinese "comprehensive national power" spans the spectrum of strategic competition without hard boundaries and comprises everything that can exert influence. It is centrally directed by the United Front Work Department of the Party. The boards of all Chinese businesses, State or commercial, include United Front members who set policy. The United Front employs three complementary tiers of maritime power.¹²

⁹ Usually attributed to Mark Twain.

¹⁰ Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin Smith. *Australia's Management of Strategic Risk in the New Era*. (ASPI Strategic Insights No 123. 2017) 1, 2

¹¹ Greg Moriarty, Secretary of Defence, *speaking at the Defence Strategy Forum* (Ngunnawal Theatre, Russell Offices). February 2019

¹² James Goldrick, *Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute Special Report, 2018). 24

At the lowest level, the People's Maritime Militia comprises paramilitary crews presenting as commercial fisherman. These also corral non-militia fishing boats to boost numbers when required.

The second tier comprises the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Natural Resources, including the Coast Guard. These exist to enforce Chinese law in sovereign maritime territories, so using them to protect Militia activities conforms to the rhetoric that the disputed areas are in fact Chinese territory. This force is well equipped for confrontation short of war, with a range of robust gun-armed vessels of up to 12000 tons. For the purpose of intimidation and ramming Coast Guard ships can be superior to expensive naval combatants, as the Royal Navy learned in the 1970s "Cod War".¹³

The third tier, the People's Liberation Army – Navy (PLA-N) is never far away, ensuring that the opposition does not escalate beyond the capability of Chinese Coast Guard. Their combatants do not need to be technologically superior to their US or Australian counterparts in order to achieve this. Their power of intimidation lies as much in the flag they fly as in their sensors and weapons.

Chinese commercial maritime enterprises enter disputed areas as if they were Chinese sovereign territory, thereby seizing the initiative and placing the onus of response on the victim. This three tier techniques seen in the South China Sea could be employed to weaken Australia's strategic position in the South Pacific.¹⁴ Activities below the threshold of war can shape the strategic situation to make the outcome of subsequent conflict a foregone conclusion as, for example, Hitler did to Czechoslovakia in 1938.

Sun Tzu advised rulers to keep demands on their opponent less than the cost of resisting, thereby obtaining benefit without the cost of war. What might China want from Australia and what pain could China inflict at low effort? Chinese could blockade Australian sea trade and supply using ambiguous techniques without needing to put a single sailor or soldier within reach of Australian mainland-based military capabilities. This is the framework in which Australia must compete.

Australia is weaker than China so must develop an asymmetric grand strategy to which its military strategy must be subordinated. China has serious internal fault lines, many with potential to fracture, exploitable through discursive contest. Despite the Party's attempts at control, information permeates to its domestic audience like US submarines through the Japanese bastion. Like Imperial Japan, China's actions belie its narrative. Deng Zhao Ping's peaceful rise, once so attractive to China's neighbours, has lost credibility under Hu Jintao and Xi Jin Ping. China has clients but few friends. To weaponise this Chinese vulnerability, Australia must develop its own narrative. Prime Minister Morrison's "Pacific Family" rhetoric has struck a chord regionally and could provide the foundations. Provided it isn't sacrificed to domestic politics, it could reverse the idea that the Islands are mere strategic pawns and enable Australia to outcompete China in the critical South Pacific.

The most important third party in this equation is Indonesia, because it could be an extremely powerful actor either for or against Australia. Conflict with Indonesia could develop from either future aggressive nationalism or a breakdown of national stability. The ways these eventualities could arise are too broad for predictions, save that a concept for archipelagic warfare would be relevant in all cases. Preventing these scenarios from developing is a far better course than dealing with the consequences.

What implications for the RAN?

¹³ *Ibid.* 8

¹⁴ Ewen Levick, *Is China using its South China Sea strategy in the South Pacific?* (The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute. 2019).

The ADF is structured for conventional warfighting which, as discussed above, China neither needs nor intends to partake in. This has three implications. Firstly, the RAN must contribute more forcefully to development of grand strategy and military strategy, as it will be directed and bound by them. Secondly, it must develop techniques to counter China's United Front. Thirdly, to do this, it must address its personnel shortages. These are expanded upon below.

Little consideration has been given to how Australia would counter Chinese use of ambiguous techniques for a distant blockade. Despite a purportedly maritime military strategy, Australian force structure considerations always gravitate towards land-centric scenarios, typically stabilisation operations in New Guinea. Serious maritime challenges are written off to the US alliance. The RAN must develop compelling arguments against what is effectively an offshore continental strategy in New Guinea that could absorb the entire Australian Army to little effect, other than making it easy to bypass, and develop arguments for an integrated maritime archipelagic concept, along the lines of the Japanese. It must also correct its weakest link, which is capacity rather than capability. Military strategy must be dictated by Grand strategy but the latter informed by the former in an iterative relationship.

The ADF's fighting power remains important even below the threshold of war, for the same reason the PLA's – credible deterrence. Concepts for credible deterrence as a sovereign Australian joint force are different to those as a junior partner in a US-led task group. The Australian Services have habitually structured more for interoperability with their US counterparts than with each other, declaratory policy notwithstanding. Consequently, the ADF is less than the sum of its parts. When the RAN is operating independently of the USN at any distance from Australia, fast air support is unlikely. Manoeuvre by sea has not been a priority for the Army; consequently its weight and logistic hunger have grown to the point where landing site options are highly predictable. Predictable landings have a bad history. The RAAF is habituated to well-equipped bases with long runways, provided, protected and supplied by the US, or allies like the UAE. In their absence, with no true expeditionary capability, it is confined to established Australian mainland bases of limited relevance to the problem at hand.

Taking lead responsibility for the South West Pacific, rather than plugging into a US task group, would better serve both the alliance and Australia's sovereign needs and align with US and Australian strengths. Excellence in archipelagic warfare, akin to the Japanese early in the war, is the most important requirement for meeting Australia's military strategic needs. That requires land forces structured to dominate the maritime domain from ashore with relatively small footprints, not logistically hungry forces needing 8000 foot runways. Naval forces should be structured to insert landing forces with A2AD systems at critical points, then rapidly extract them and reinsert them elsewhere as required, operating in a mutually supporting pattern to prevent them being isolated and bypassed. If the Pacific step-up works, many of these operations might be permissive. Where they are not, it does not imply opposed landings. There are more than 22000 islands in the archipelago most of which are undefended and many of which are sparsely populated. Ambitions to dominate heavily populated urbanised land masses are inessential to a maritime strategy and beyond Australia's means.

Mutual support will require, among other things, increased emphasis on offensive mine warfare. Defensively, the RAN must address the vulnerability of its two main fleet bases. Both are vulnerable to submarines and mining and serious consideration needs to be given to defences and wider dispersal, including the use of low-cost mini-ports, currently becoming commercially popular.

Indonesia dominates Australia's vital lines of communication but Australia is of decreasing political and economic importance to Indonesia. Conversely, Australian and Indonesian military capabilities are remarkably complementary and a little imagination would go a long way in changing the TNI's perception, which is important politically as well as militarily. Human relationships matter

strategically. Understanding and promoting the areas in which the RAN can benefit the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) would be a good investment.

Australia can also learn from Indonesia. If any nation should understand archipelagic warfare it is Indonesia. TNI-AL is well equipped for shallow water coastal and riverine operations, which Australia is not. Much of TNI's best thinking on this subject resides with the Marines (KORMAR), yet this branch of the TNI gets the least attention from Australia. The Australian Army largely ignores it because it belongs to the Navy and the RAN ignores it because it is a marine corps, which speaks volumes about the durability of service-stovepipes four years after the First Principles Review. Getting KORMAR and Australian amphibious forces closer would benefit both.

Competing against Chinese three tier methods in expensive high-end surface warships is folly; therefore lower cost robust 2nd tier vessels suited to operations below the threshold will be required. Short of war, they can do all that a surface combatant does at lower cost. Whether they are Navy or not would be a decision for Government, but either way, they will be competing in the same recruiting pool that has proven insufficient for Navy's existing needs, so, it must address its personnel shortages. In this respect there are potential synergies with the Pacific Family narrative. In the 1970s the British Army suffered similar personnel shortages and successfully recruited Fijians who turned out to be excellent soldiers and eventually returned to Fiji, with good will towards Britain that still exists today.

An older British model may however be more useful. For the first half of the 20th century integration between the Royal Navy and the Dominion Navies was unparalleled. A similar relationship with sovereign Pacific Island Nations could increase the power of both Australia and the Family. To overcome perceptions of neo-colonialism, Australia must offer solid and sustained net benefit to the Family, including a meaningful voice in decision making. The RAN potentially has a leading role in this in provision of technology, platforms, training and specialist advice, although this has to be managed carefully to avoid perceptions of militarising the Pacific. Ultimately, the Islands may wish to allow Australia to back up their maritime sovereignty protection operations, in the same way that the Chinese Coastguard backs the Militia and the PLA-N backs the Coastguard, preventing Chinese escalation dominance.

Conclusion

Australia is incapable of militarily defeating a united and determined China or future Indonesia without direct American support which, for various reasons, may not be forthcoming.¹⁵ When Japan went to war in late 1941 it was also incapable of militarily defeating a united and determined America. Its only chance would have been to break American public support for war with a convincing narrative, which it rendered untenable in China. In the globalised, interconnected 21st century strategic narrative is more important than ever, especially for weaker powers like Australia. The RAN must play a lead role in developing any grand strategic narrative based on influence in our maritime archipelagic region. To support the narrative, it is necessary to be able to counter the United Front's methods, which demands a second-tier fleet. The RAN's capacity is limited by personnel, and opening recruiting to Pacific Family members would ameliorate this and support the narrative.

Securing oil supply was the Imperial Japanese Navy's motivation for war and shortage of it a major factor in its defeat. Australia's resource supply and trade are potentially vulnerable to Chinese distant blockade by a range of methods short of war or by Indonesian interdiction. If the RAN is to develop the tactical credibility necessary to support Australian grand strategy it must drive Australian military strategic level thinking away from centring on resource intensive land-centric stabilisation operations. Its focus should be mastery of integrated archipelagic warfare with limited temporary commitments

¹⁵ H. White, *How to Defend Australia* (LaTrobe University Press, 2019), 7-17.

ashore, only where relevant to sea control. The ADF does not exist to provide Australian flags in US task groups. The challenges of how to most effectively integrate the elements that make up national and military power are very different from those faced by the Japanese in 1941, but the importance of getting it right is as important now as it was then.

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