

Army after Afghanistan



Chief of Army Lieutenant General David Morrison addressed the Sydney Institute on 28 February. During his speech he said his job was to look forward and plan for a future where Australia had an army that was as relevant and robust as was affordable and not allowed to slip back in to a 'peacetime army'.



"I have no greater priority than making certain that Army's soldiers are as fully prepared for their role in Afghanistan – and in other operational areas where they are deployed – as is possible.

The title of this address is not intended to convey any impression that we are moving on from the operational challenges that face our men and women deployed in dangerous environments across the world today. However, my job as Army's chief is to also look forward, to the outer years of this decade and beyond, and to ensure that Australia has an army that is as relevant and robust as is affordable.

Secondly, while I will speak almost entirely about my service, my primary consideration is ensuring that Army can function as part of a joint force, in concert with Navy and Air Force, and other government departments and, indeed, with coalition partners.

While it is not given the credence I think it deserves, Australia has a Defence Department that is very collegiate and strategic in its focus. Australia needs its ADF more than it needs its Navy, its Army or its Air Force if it is to possess robust military options now and in the future. It's about being a joint force, and Army knows that.

I have assumed command of the Australian Army at a challenging time. We are an Army with a real operational focus. The war in Afghanistan is now the longest ever waged by Australians. The men and women of the Australian Defence Force are in dire peril on a daily basis, engaged in combat operations against a determined, ruthless and tenacious enemy. All three services are performing splendidly, but this war is demanding the greatest focus, commitment and, indeed, sacrifices from the Army.

Nor should we forget that we continue to sustain significant deployments in Timor Leste and the Solomon

Islands as well as a range of smaller operations all over the world.

My number one priority, as I have said, is the support and sustenance of our troops on those operations.

Yet those demands cannot divert us from the continuous process of modernisation and adaptation, which is essential to keeping the Army abreast of changes in technology and the character of war itself. Our force planners refer to these twin obligations in the convenient shorthand of fighting 'the war' while developing forces capable of fighting 'the next war.' In other words we must continue to deploy potent forces capable of prevailing on the contemporary battlefield, as exemplified by the war in Afghanistan, while continuing to modernise the Army in conformity with the strategic guidance from the Government of Australia contained in the White Paper of 2009.

Over the past decade we, the Army, have also substantially enhanced our firepower, combat mobility and levels of protection. This has reversed what I believe was a long-term, albeit gradual, decline in the fighting power of the Army, which took place in the period from the end of the Vietnam War until the strategic shock of the Timor crisis of 1999.

The goal that I have set myself as the current chief is to lay the foundations for the Army of the third decade of this century. It is vital that we do not succumb to the sort of thinking that justified a serious reduction in the strength and capability of the Army that we experienced in the wake of withdrawal from Vietnam.

I am well aware of the many competing demands on government revenue that exist currently and in the timeframe that I am speaking about. It is on me to look at these matters objectively, to plan prudently, to be fiscally responsible and to use sound and logical arguments to put that case forward.

I have been chief for over eight months and I have been very conscious of the great support from the government in terms of changes to our force structure and to capability enhancement within my service.

Nonetheless, I believe that so called 'peace dividends' seldom, if ever accrue. It would be a serious error to conclude that in the wake of our draw-down in Afghanistan that the Army will never again need to deploy overseas. Such implicit assumptions were made from 1976 to 1999. They were sustained in the face of evidence to the contrary such as significant deployments to Cambodia, Somalia, Namibia, Rwanda and Bougainville. This divergence between our declared strategic preferences and practices has been described by the respected scholar Mike Evans as the 'Tyranny of Dissonance'.

History has clearly demonstrated that 'peace dividends' invariably become 'peace liabilities' when the military must restore its capabilities when the next threat arrives.

Ultimately, the deployment of INTERFET marked a strategic watershed for Australia. For the Army, it brought to an end the benign era known colloquially as the 'long peace.'

Our strategic policy makers had been very reluctant, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, to see Australia commit troops to a foreign war.

We would rely instead on astute middle-power diplomacy, the primacy of our closest ally the United States, and the stability of the Suharto regime, to posture our forces to defend Australia from behind the sea-air gap.

As we achieved deeper engagement with our Asian neighbours, the era of 'forward defence' came to be viewed as an anachronism. There is a broad consensus now that Australia seeks security 'in Asia' rather than 'from Asia', a consensus perhaps inspired by the realisation that the so-called 'sea-air gap' is, in fact, a 'sea-air-land' gap.

Throughout much of my career as a junior- and middle-ranking officer, we trained for operations to defeat small

raids and incursions across northern Australia. Many in Army were critical of these scenarios and the force structures that they supported. But the Army was also, in part, a contributor to this particular approach.

We were, perhaps, too insular in the wake of our withdrawal from Vietnam and possibly somewhat slow to adapt to the changing military and strategic paradigm of the times.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary valour shown by our soldiers in that long war, the service after Vietnam was not immune to the age-old problem of armies – that of being more comfortable looking back with pride, rather than looking forward with focus.

The broader developments in combined-arms warfare in the wake of events such as the Yom Kippur war of 1973, the growth in the use of technology to enhance intelligence and surveillance capabilities, and the exponential increase in both lethality and precision of available weapon systems did not pass us by – rather it left us interested, but not too much changed.

Over time, the Army evolved into a force of single capabilities. We became too light, too dependent on wheeled vehicles and our organisations hollowed out.

Operations in East Timor in 1999-2000 exposed serious deficiencies in our land forces. Much of the work of my predecessors as Chief of Army has been focused on remedying the shortcomings that we identified in East Timor.

While a lot has been achieved, a great deal remains to be done.

The operations of the past decade have informed much of our force development. Unlike some, who continue to suggest that our deployment of forces to East Timor the Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan



THIS HAS REVERSED WHAT I BELIEVE WAS A LONG-TERM, ALBEIT GRADUAL, DECLINE IN THE FIGHTING POWER OF THE ARMY, WHICH TOOK PLACE IN THE PERIOD FROM THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR UNTIL THE STRATEGIC SHOCK OF THE TIMOR CRISIS OF 1999.