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Searching for substance

Australians should question the role and structure of their armed forces – and they are certainly doing so at the moment.

■ MAJGEN (Retd) Jim Molan/CANBERRA

Questions are being asked about the numbers of equipment such as 100 Joint Strike Fighters and 12 submarines, capabilities such as that based around the two Landing Helicopter Docks, the resourcing of Army with the view that its cash should be given to others – and the overall defence development process normally gets mentioned. Sadly, much of the debate is predictably feral.

As an ex-practitioner, I welcome the discipline of government-endorsed strategy. However, I will argue against policy unconnected to reality, as so much of it has been, whether it comes from blog sites, think tanks, the bureaucracy or from government. Policy is not an end in itself.

Much effort is expended in trying to improve the development process for Defence but none of us should have any faith in this process, as it lacks integrity and authority. Govern-

ments don't follow it. Ministers ignore it. Bureaucracies follow it mindlessly. New entrants into defence industry believe it but not for long.

As a result, efforts to debate why we have certain numbers of equipment types generally are futile if we are looking for logic.

I have greater faith in the short-term development process that prepares the ADF to fight our present wars. We are not too bad at learning lessons at the tactical level. We have to be good at this because our forces are always poorly prepared for every conflict.

We are better at lower-level development because the process is subject to rapid feedback. The mind is focused by casualties, from the Cabinet down to those who fight.

This imperative is missing at the strategic level for long-term development. There is no downside to the uniformed and civilian bureaucracy getting the process or structures wrong. There is almost no public

downside for governments to under-invest in defence.

There is no public feedback loop that holds the bureaucracy or politicians to account for how they perform. By the time it becomes an issue with the public it's usually too late.

The Defence bureaucracy understands process and lists any numbers of objectives, milestones and concepts but they simply do not work. Many confuse process and strategy, and see policy as an end in itself. My objection to the process is because it does not produce a demonstrably coherent force.

I would be happy to accept a sanguine view of processes if they were followed, aligned and authoritative. Like so much in Defence, the process is not outcome-oriented.

Secrecy is perhaps the greatest hurdle. Much of what passes for secrecy in Defence development is merely protecting ministers from consequences. Almost nothing, apart from immediate operations, has to be secret.

The continuing lack of real defence capability in the ADF is a greater threat to this country than most things a foreign intelligence service might glean.

Almost every major defence development problem begins with Parliament and with politicians, who are risk averse. Yet we continually try to reform the department, the ADF and the processes, and not politicians or parliament.

Either accept that this is the source of the problem and cannot be changed and be happy or do some real reform in defence in Australia.

The debate spirals out of control when academic theorists get into tactics. Many feel that power projection through an amphibious capability is an 'offensive' capability and should not be considered in what some call a 'defence of Australia' strategy.

Capabilities such as amphibious simply exist – you can use them offensively or defensively. Defence of Australia requires power projection as much as forward defence or the tactical technique of sea denial – often mistaken for a strategy.

To project military power from Sydney to Derby in defence of the continent is much the same as projecting it from Darwin to the middle of the South China Sea to pre-empt a threat to the continent. I have

yet to find, in Australia's case, capabilities that are offensive or defensive only.

Other theorists and academics see future defence development as needing to meet a cataclysmic battle where our JSFs and subs fight an opponent's invasion force and J-20s.

These critics ask: What good would the Australian military be against a large Asian navy or land force? That is clever argument but dangerously simplistic.

What might also happen before this cataclysmic battle is a long period when the government expects Defence to provide military options for the unpredictable. Such options come from what the ADF is at the time.

This might happen in what some call 'our region' – often defined to match the lack of ADF capability to do much. But I suggest it may also happen in what I see as our region – that part of the world on which our security and prosperity depend.

Nothing gets the attention of voters and therefore governments as fast as threats to our prosperity and bizarrely, governments in the past have been deeply disappointed in the options that Defence has to offer on the crisis day, despite the fact that they were responsible for those options.

We do not even know what form a cataclysmic battle might take in the future and what technology or technique will be used. That does not form a very good basis for putting all our resources into submarines, for example.

Those who say we should weight our force toward one capability or another, such as subs, because of the asymmetric effect, are deluded. Think about it – achieving asymmetry is only possible when the opponent cannot adapt over time.

The cataclysmic battle in some form or other might become probable but there will be warning time, short or long, and then would be the time to stress particular capabilities.

This is the core force concept, but like so many other so-called

force structuring principles it was not observed in the past in Australia, not resourced and did not eventuate. The core force concept is not another way of arguing for impotence in the ADF or lessening defence spending.

If we become strong and effective on one capability now, then this merely allows a potential enemy to develop other capabilities over time, for example by destabilising neighbours or cutting sea lanes.

In the future, we may need to focus on countering long-range air attack, counter-insurgency forces, cyber or space. We may even need to develop Mass.

Until then – and we are not there now despite all the talk of China – we should maintain the broadest base of capabilities that we can afford that allows the ADF to offer a range of options to government for today's crises, while having the ability within a period of time to perhaps develop one particular capability or to expand all capabilities.

This is the conclusion that must be drawn from the current strategic environment that Australia faces.

If government makes a decision not to fund a broad-based force, it does not necessarily mean we should then put all our cash into a few capabilities. The threat decides the force structure, not government short termism.

It is still a valid course of action in times of economic stringency to maintain as much of the broad base as possible until funding returns. The threat is the driver of legitimate strategy, not arbitrary funding decisions.

Let's not make bad government decisions worse by then using this to justify pet capabilities that are unlikely to be effective.

If you do not have a good understanding of tactics you should not be allowed to make strategy. This does not exclude all civilians and would exclude many in uniform.

It's madness that Strategy Branch in Defence is not often headed by a uniform or that initial defence drafts of White Papers are not primarily written by uniforms before the politicians and their hacks turn them into illogical, incomprehensible political documents.

Defence should never be political. Defence should be hard-nosed, accurate and clear. Let the politicians take real responsibility for under-investment by having their own people publicly convert Defence views into political documents in their own offices.

Force 2030, even with variations on some numbers, made more sense than any force structure I have seen since the end of Vietnam.

Individual capabilities such as amphibious, subs and JSF made tactical sense in the context of Force 2030 because it was broadly-based and enabled the ADF to provide the widest range of options for government, as well as being best prepared to stress or expand capabilities as a future threat might demand.

Criticism that Force 2030 was always unaffordable, and therefore wrong, are rubbish.

This country could afford Force 2030 or a similar broad-based force structure and should do so if it is justifiable on threat grounds. The present government merely decided it was not going to invest in defence.

Of critical importance to those who believe that Defence's processes are valid is the fact that at no stage did the government even try to justify the destruction of Force 2030 on strategic grounds.

Given the emasculation of the ADF in the latest federal budget, one opportunity is to at least get the intellectual part of Defence right over the next few years, when there will be no money for anything much else.

Let's get an open, auditable development process up and running, one connected to the real strategic environment, based on public feedback and with integrity and authority, that allows us to learn from mistakes rather than to protect those responsible – and one that enables us to respond well when the real world once again impacts on Australia.

I make this argument in more detail here: http://australiana-aviation.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Jim_Molan_ADBR_Jan-Feb_2012.pdf.

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