

**SERVING VITAL INTERESTS:
AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC PLANNING IN PEACE AND WAR**

**AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC PLANNING DURING
THE VIETNAM WAR**

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Two basic points need to be made at the outset concerning Australian strategic planning in the Vietnam War. The simple fact is that Australian strategic planning during the Vietnam War was almost non-existent. The Australian Government had a policy, generally summarised as 'forward defence'. This was based on the assumption that Australian security could best be ensured by military involvement in Southeast Asia. It relied heavily on close association with the countries that the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, liked to call our 'great and powerful friends', the United States and Britain. Australian actions were therefore highly dependent on the strategic plans that were developed in London and Washington. The emphasis in this paper, therefore, will be not so much on Australian strategic planning as on Australian strategic decision-making, the taking of decisions which were often reactions to events and situations that reflected American and/or British strategic planning.

The second initial point concerns the way in which we use the word 'strategy'. It comes from a Greek word for 'generalship', and its dictionary definition is 'the art of projecting and directing the larger military movements and operations of a campaign'. But a '*strategos*' in ancient Greece could be either a general or a chief magistrate, and the word has come to imply the interaction of the higher levels of political and military thinking, the levels where generals and political leaders share the decision-making. This paper will look at the ways in which political and military considerations interacted in some of the principal strategic decisions of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Its theme is that, in most cases, political imperatives outweighed military objectives and desiderata, no matter how powerful those military factors might have been. For military officers the lesson of this episode is that we live in a liberal democracy and that the political factors that influence the people's elected representatives are always likely to overrule even the most powerful and cogently argued military considerations.

Three episodes in Australia's Vietnam involvement illustrate this theme—the commitment of the first battalion of ground troops in 1965; the process by which the Army commitment was raised to its highest level, a three-battalion task force, in 1967; and the decisions concerning the way in which the Australian troops were withdrawn in the early 1970s. In each case this paper relies heavily on what I have written for two volumes of the *Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1975*. The first episode was discussed in *Crises and Commitments*, a volume of the Official History that was published in 1992.¹ The other two episodes are discussed in *A Nation at War*, which may be seen as a sequel to *Crises and Commitments* and which is scheduled to be published in early 1997.

The Commitment of the First Battalion

The first approaches from the United States to suggest that Australia might send units of ground troops to Vietnam (as distinct from the instructors in the Australian Army Training Team which had first been committed in 1962) came in December 1964. These early approaches, however, did not make clear exactly what was sought, or likely to be sought, from Australia. At this time Australia's principal concern in regional policy was to ensure that the United States remained strongly committed to the defence of Southeast Asia, at a time when many observers believed that Washington might decide that it could no longer prevent the overthrow of the anti-communist government of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, by its communist opponents.

The papers discussed by Australian Cabinet ministers and military chiefs at this time were notable for their lack of any clear planning. In the absence of knowledge about American policies and intentions, Australian policy-makers did not know for what eventualities they should make plans. Instead the Australian approach was to give strong rhetorical support for the current American commitment in Vietnam, partly to encourage Washington not to turn away from that commitment. At the same time, Australian officials devoted their efforts towards discovering what the United States intended to do in Vietnam—that is, would it introduce large numbers of ground forces into the South or would it withdraw its forces, most probably as far as Thailand. Eventually it was agreed that at the end of March 1965 staff talks would be held between the military representatives of Australia, New Zealand and the United States at Honolulu, the headquarters of the United States Pacific Command. The Australian delegation was to be led by Air Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger who, as Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, was Australia's highest ranking military officer. (The position of Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee was the forerunner of what is today known as the Chief of the Defence Force, but with rather less direct authority over the Chiefs of the three services.) The question of Australia's military involvement in Vietnam would clearly be affected greatly by the way in which Scherger conducted his mission to these military staff talks.

Throughout the preceding months, the briefs provided to Ministers by military and civilian officials had been pessimistic about the situation in Vietnam and uncertain about American intentions. The brief prepared for Scherger and the delegation to the talks in Honolulu, although prepared by senior civilian officials as well as military officers and endorsed by the Ministers in the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet, nevertheless raised the questions uppermost in the minds of the military who were wondering whether Australian forces might be sent to Vietnam. It noted that the idea of committing ground forces had been raised, but the statements of American officials on the purpose of this commitment had been vague and contradictory. The brief therefore said that, above all, Scherger should get detailed information on the Americans' military objectives and their concept of operations. It went on to raise many of what would later come to be regarded as some of the key questions that bedevilled the whole Vietnam commitment. Scherger was instructed, for example, to find out how the United States authorities proposed to cope with the problems of 'foreign troops operating in a civil war in which they will have great difficulty in distinguishing friend from foe'; how they would cope with the anti-American and anti-foreign propaganda that the communists would inevitably use as soon as American and other foreign troops, including Australian, were sent; and how they would deal with the possibility that the forces of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) would simply draw aside and let the Americans and their allies do the fighting for them.

These issues were not solely military, but political as well. Nevertheless they were fundamental to any decisions on a commitment of Australian troops to Vietnam. Although the idea of sending an Australian battalion had been mooted in discussions among defence officials, the brief scarcely mentioned the idea. It noted that the Americans might indicate a requirement for ground, air or naval forces, or any combination of those forces, but did not give any suggestion that any particular commitment was expected or favoured.

Yet the way in which Scherger handled his task was quite different from that implied by the brief. The initial discussions in Honolulu made it clear that the Americans were highly uncertain as to the strategy that they intended to pursue in Vietnam. Three quite different approaches were being actively considered. One involved the development of a series of enclaves along the Vietnamese coast; another proposed placing two or three divisions in Laos in order to cut off the infiltration from North to South Vietnam along the famous Ho Chi Minn trail; while a third proposed the placing of major units in the northern provinces of South Vietnam and Thailand, to deny strategically important areas to the enemy. The use to be made of any Australian troops would be quite different, according to which of these plans was adopted. Yet the attitude taken by Scherger at the staff talks did not reflect either the uncertainty of the American position or the cautious and highly non-committal approach of the brief he had been given for the talks. Instead Scherger seemed more anxious than the Americans to have Australia commit troops. He did not press the questions that he had been instructed to ask, but simply let it be known that he would recommend that Australia should send a battalion and that he expected that the Cabinet would agree to this recommendation.

And so it transpired. I will not here traverse the actual decision-making by the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet, the six key ministers who eventually decided in late April that Australia would commit a battalion. The details of the decision-making are given in *Crises and Commitments*. What I wish to note here is that much of the ministerial decision-making was pre-empted by the attitude taken by Scherger at the military staff talks at Honolulu. His actions there and his subsequent report to Cabinet ministers made it highly likely that the Government would take the decision that he had confidently predicted.

Instead let us look at some aspects of this episode, in terms of the distinction that I have been drawing between the political and the military. At first sight, one might say that this was a case of the military dominating the political. Here we have the highest ranking member of the uniformed services, the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, behaving in a way which virtually preordained a major political decision to be made by Cabinet Ministers. But I suggest that that would be a misleading interpretation. It should be seen more accurately as the domination of the political over the military, although at all times political and military considerations were closely intertwined and civilian and military officers were acting jointly. In essence, the brief prepared by the Defence Committee for the military staff talks covered the issues of greatest concern to the military: what were the Americans' military objectives, what was their concept of operations, how would they deal with some of the predictable problems of ground operations in Vietnam? Scherger in effect disregarded these concerns and acted in a way that virtually ensured that Australia would take the decision to send a battalion, in order to reinforce the American willingness to stand firm in Vietnam. This was certainly consistent with the Australian policy of forward defence, but it was a political decision for ministers to take. Scherger was acting as 'a politician in uniform' (as John Gorton would later describe him) and some observers speculated that his actions were based on his close relationship with the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. Many of the military aspects of the commitment of the battalion were less well planned than they should have been, because too many of the basic questions had not been addressed.

Raising the Commitment to its Peak

Let us now turn to 1967, to look at the process by which the Australian Government raised the commitment to its highest level, when the task force was raised from two battalions to three. In early 1966 the Government had replaced the single battalion with a two-battalion task force, but before long there was pressure to add a third. In a two-battalion force, one battalion was required to defend the base while the other was on operations. With three battalions, two could be on operations while the third defended the base, thus doubling the task force's operational capacity and creating what the Army felt to be a balanced force. It was therefore a concept popular in Army circles, provided that the third battalion could be raised without undue strains on financial and personnel resources.

But the question of a third battalion was not to be decided by consideration of its military effectiveness in Phuoc Tuy province, the task force's location. Instead it had much more to do with considerations of diplomacy and the domestic economy. In December 1966, immediately after winning what was at that time the greatest electoral victory in Australian political history on the issues of Vietnam and conscription, the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, apparently wanted to send a third battalion at a time when the American authorities were not specifically requesting it but were strongly hinting that such a move would be highly welcome. The enthusiastic Holt had to be persuaded, with great reluctance, that Australia could not make such a commitment because of its implications for the commitment of defence personnel and funds. Instead the Cabinet agreed to send a number of other units from all three services.

In the middle of the year Australia's international outlook changed markedly. In July the British government announced that it was accelerating the withdrawal of its forces from Southeast Asia, adopting a faster rate than it had decided on only a year previously. This was a major concern for Australia, which based its foreign and defence policies on close association with both Britain and the United States in Southeast Asia. Australia's regional allies, Malaysia and Singapore, were also deeply worried about this withdrawal. One implication was that Australia might face increasing pressure to raise its existing troop commitments in the Malaysia-

Singapore area. But at precisely this time the United States increased the pressure to send a third battalion for the Australian task force in Vietnam. Within days of the British announcement of their accelerated withdrawal, President Johnson told Holt that he was sending two of his most senior advisers, Clark Clifford and General Maxwell Taylor, to the capitals of the countries contributing troops to Vietnam. Clifford and Taylor spent seven hours with the Australian Cabinet, and it was clear that their principal aim was to encourage the Australians to send more troops. This was not sought for military reasons arising from the position in Phuoc Tuy province, but primarily for political reasons within the United States. Clifford explained that the President wanted to send more American troops, but faced the difficult task of asking Congress to raise taxes to cover the war-related budget deficit. Australia's attitude would have a great deal of impact in Washington, for if allies like Australia and New Zealand were to commit a small number of soldiers, it would enable the President to send many more American troops. As Clifford put it two days later in Wellington, 'one additional New Zealand soldier might produce fifty Americans'.

Holt by this time was far less enthusiastic about sending a third battalion than he had been only eight months earlier. He pointed to the strategic difficulties created by the new British policy and its effects on Malaysia, Singapore and Papua New Guinea; but he spoke more emphatically of economic concerns, noting that the marked growth in Australian defence expenditure had placed burdens on the balance of payments; that a recent drought had been costly, and that Australia's immigration and foreign aid programmes imposed heavy costs. The Cabinet thus gave no assurances of additional support to the President's special representatives. Indeed, their attitude was so negative that it achieved precisely the opposite effect to that which had been intended. The Australians had wanted to encourage the United States administration to stay the course in Vietnam, despite the rapidly rising financial and political costs of the war, but Clifford was more impressed by the Australian reluctance to take any stronger military measures. He later wrote that it had been a major factor in convincing him that the United States should begin to withdraw from Vietnam, a policy he initiated when he became Secretary for Defense in 1968.

In addition to their diplomatic and economic concerns, the Australian ministers had more immediate political factors on their minds. After suffering a large swing to the Opposition in a by-election in July, the Government was worried by its prospects in another by-election in September as well as a half-Senate election in November. The eventual decision to send the third battalion was taken in early September, but not announced until early October, after the second by-election. Even then, the Government decided initially that it would not immediately inform the Americans of the decision, hoping to use it as a bargaining counter for improved terms for the purchase of the new F-111 aircraft for the RAAF as well as stronger American support for Australian involvement in Malaysia and Singapore. Only after the President had personally subjected the Australian Treasurer, who was visiting the United States, to extraordinarily strong pressure did the Government decide to tell the Americans of the commitment of the third battalion. At the same time Prime Minister Holt indicated that this was as far as Australia could go in supplying forces for Vietnam.

What, then, does this episode tell us about Australian strategic planning and the interaction of political and military elements?

You may remember the Sherlock Holmes story in which the significant point was the dog that did not bark. Similarly, it is the omissions in the above story that are relevant to our theme. The commitment of a third battalion for the Australian Task Force was not to any significant degree a response to military considerations in the field in Phuoc Tuy province, which showed that a three-battalion task force was better balanced and more effective in operations than a two-battalion task force. Nor was it the outcome of a carefully considered strategic plan, which allocated Australia's limited military resources to the locations in which they could achieve the best results for the nation's security. Instead, it was the outcome of a combination of quite separate pressures, of which the most important was President Johnson's need for an additional weapon in his battle with Congress over raising taxes to pay for the war. After agonising months for the Australian ministers, this pressure outweighed the costs to the Australian economy, the expected electoral damage, and the implications of the accelerated British military withdrawal from the region.

The Withdrawal of Australian Troops from Vietnam

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the dominance of political over military considerations is the process by which Australian troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. In January 1969 Richard Nixon became President of the United States and almost immediately began what his Defense Secretary called the 'Vietnamisation' of the war effort. Declaring that the South Vietnamese forces were now better able to sustain the war effort themselves, the Americans began reductions to their huge commitment of about half a million personnel in Vietnam. In June Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 troops from Vietnam and in September he followed this by announcing the withdrawal of a further 35,000. At the same time American officials let it be known that they wanted the governments of the other five troop-contributing countries—Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines and Thailand—to maintain their forces in Vietnam (which were far smaller than the American commitment) at full strength.

Nevertheless the initial announcements of American troop withdrawals inevitably created pressures for a similar partial withdrawal of Australian troops. Officials in Defence, External Affairs and the service departments began discussing the possibility of Australian troop withdrawals. In these discussions Army representatives argued strongly that the task force, which now comprised three battalions and supporting forces, was a balanced unit. They believed that to withdraw one battalion would be dangerous and pressed the view that if one battalion were to be withdrawn, all should be withdrawn. This view was supported by all services at the highest level and was strongly endorsed by General Sir John Wilton, who had succeeded Air Marshal Scherger as the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly, the Chief of the General Staff. The phrase that became popular as the summary of this approach was 'one out, all out'. It was a view that was generally accepted by John Gorton, who had become Prime Minister in January 1968, and several other ministers. They publicly endorsed the arguments that the three-battalion task force was well balanced, that partial withdrawals would be dangerous, and that any withdrawal must therefore be on the basis of 'one out, all out'.

Gorton and other ministers generally maintained this approach for the next six months, the second half of 1969, which included the general election in October. In a television interview during the campaign Gorton repeated that when Australia's three battalions were withdrawn from Vietnam, they would come home together, because a gradual withdrawal, one battalion at a time, would only endanger the force. Nevertheless he was forced to make some concessions to the rising pressure for a programme of withdrawal created by the continuing American policy of troop reductions. In his policy speech for the election, Gorton emphasised that Australia would not withdraw unilaterally, but he also said: 'Should there be developments which result in plans for continuing reduction of United States forces over a period then we would expect to be phased in to that programme and we would see that we are'. Despite his public insistence on the 'one out, all out' approach, this left the way open for some form of graduated withdrawal.

The Gorton Government was returned at the October election, but with a much reduced majority. The Nixon administration continued to indicate that, while it was reducing the American contingent, it wanted Australia and the other troop-contributing countries to maintain their existing forces at full strength. The Australian Embassy in Washington noted that policy on Vietnam was under the President's personal control, with even the Secretaries of State and Defense exercising less influence than their predecessors in the Johnson administration. Nixon was reported to have a timetable for withdrawal in his mind, but few people in Washington, let alone Canberra, knew what it was.

After the October election Malcolm Fraser joined the Australian Cabinet as Minister for Defence. A young and forceful minister, he had previously served as Minister for the Army and knew the defence machinery well. In late 1969 he began to press his military advisers to abandon their opposition to a graduated withdrawal. He pointed out that the task force had previously operated with two battalions and could surely do so again, given the supposed improvement in the security situation in Puoc Tuy province. The Chiefs of Staff Committee,

with Generals Wilton and Daly in the lead, remained opposed to any reduction in the Australian commitment. They said that the United States might withdraw many thousands of troops before giving serious attention to the Vietnamisation of Phuoc Tuy province. As so often during the Vietnam War, Australian policy-makers were uncertain about American policies and plans, and reiterated the need to seek further information from Washington. In response to the pressure from Fraser and other ministers, the Defence Committee conceded that the task force might be reduced from three to two battalions, but only if an American battalion were available to reinforce it when required. The Chiefs would not accept an ARVN battalion in that role, as they assessed the combat effectiveness of the South Vietnamese battalions as being less than half that of an Australian battalion.

Cabinet's reaction was that the Government should seek more information from the Americans about their plans. Gorton sent a personal message to Nixon, asking for information about his 'long-term thinking', so that Australian troop withdrawals could be based on joint Australian-American planning 'rather than be decided by us at short notice in response to specific announcements on your part'. Gorton therefore asked for high-level discussions between the two countries, strongly hinting that he would welcome a personal meeting with Nixon. The response was less positive than the Australians had hoped. Nixon nominated some Pentagon officials to conduct discussions with Australian representatives. He did not insist absolutely that the Australians should maintain their force at full strength and even hinted that greater economic assistance, such as the provision of better housing for the South Vietnamese forces, might offset a reduction in troop strength. The Australian ministers did not pick up this hint and, in effect, abandoned their hope for a coordinated programme of troop withdrawals. They saw no alternative but to continue with the pattern of ad hoc responses to American announcements, of which they were given only a little prior notice.

A few days later, on 15 December, Nixon announced a further reduction of 50,000 American troops. Gorton issued a press statement saying that, when the next substantial withdrawal took place, some Australian units would be included. Later that day he made a further statement, stressing that he knew of no timetable for the American reductions; that there was no fixed timetable for Australian reductions; and that there had been no decision on how large any Australian reduction might be. Reporters noted that Gorton looked ill-tempered and uncomfortable as he announced the beginning of the end of Australia's war in Vietnam. All too obviously, it was an immediate reaction to an American announcement, not the first phase of a carefully considered defence strategy. It also signalled that Gorton and his colleagues were abandoning the military preference for the 'one out, all out' approach, in favour of a gradual withdrawal of the Australian force.

In the early months of 1970 attempts were made to bring some more planning and coordination into the Australian approach to troop withdrawal, but these efforts were bedevilled by the rivalries and tensions between the three key ministers, Gorton, Fraser and William McMahon at External Affairs. In March, at Fraser's instigation, Cabinet agreed that the Government would announce, probably in April, that the battalion that was scheduled to be withdrawn in November would not be replaced. Nevertheless Australian Ministers, like many people in Washington and around the world, were shocked when Nixon announced in April that the United States would withdraw a further 150,000 troops, a far larger reduction than anyone had anticipated. As foreshadowed, Gorton now announced that Australia would make its first withdrawal in November, by not replacing the battalion that would end its tour of duty then, but the way in which this announcement was handled brought no credit to the Government. It was all too apparent that the Government had been forced to abandon the preference of its military advisers for the 'one out, all out' approach and that it had had to resort to short-term reactions to American policy announcements rather than to develop and sustain a clearly defined strategy for Australian withdrawal from Vietnam.

Conclusion

What do these episodes tell us about Australian strategy in the Vietnam War? First, they underline my initial point, that there was no effective Australian strategic planning. Under the forward defence policy Australian decisions were linked so closely to British and American policies that they were dependent on plans developed in London and Washington, not in Canberra. When those plans changed, as for example when Britain accelerated its withdrawal from Southeast Asia or when the United States began to reduce its troop commitment in Vietnam, Australian policies were forced to change. Moreover, Australia was all too often in the position of knowing too little about the plans and intentions of its major allies. That uncomfortable ignorance applied when the plans were being discussed quite broadly within a government, as was the case with the British plans to withdraw from east of Suez, and when they were tightly held to the highest levels, as with Nixon's ideas of troop withdrawals.

But even in the decisions that Australia did take within the framework of the strategic plans of its allies, political considerations were always likely to outweigh military factors. In the case of troop withdrawal, the political pressure for a graduated withdrawal generated by the American reductions proved more powerful than the strong military preference for the 'one out, all out' approach. The decision to send the third battalion had been determined more by the balance of diplomatic pressure, itself reflecting the domestic political balance within the United States, and Australian economic and electoral considerations than by the desire of the military to have a well balanced task force operating in Vietnam. This dominance of political considerations over military concerns applied even when the central figure wore a uniform, as was the case with Scherger at Honolulu.

We should conclude, therefore, as we began, by recalling that a '*strategos*' could be a civil or a military leader. In a democracy, the generalship of politicians is always likely to prevail over the politics of generals.

Endnotes

1. Peter Edwards with Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965* (Sydney, 1992).