Defending defence diplomacy

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Executive summary

- Decades of investment in defence diplomacy resulted in Thailand being the first ASEAN country to support the Australian-led UN-mandated 1999 intervention in East Timor.
- Australian alumni like PNG CDF Brigadier Gilbert Toropo exemplify the utility in investing in defence diplomacy through scholarships, exchanges and exercises.
- Military engagement on carefully selected assistance and development projects could generate considerable goodwill between the respective forces, while bolstering mutual understanding, security and stability.

If diplomacy is ‘the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country’s representatives abroad’, then what does defence diplomacy look like? Perhaps the best way to think about it is to consider specific examples.

Australia’s relationship with Thailand, for example, has been of considerable value particularly to Australia’s ability to make a significant and useful contribution to regional security. Australia established diplomatic relations with Thailand in 1952 and was a founding member of the now-defunct South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), headquartered in Bangkok from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.

Thereafter, as an investment in the relationship, Australia participated routinely in a range of bilateral military exercises designed to foster mutual understanding and greater interoperability for a range of contingencies. Such air, land, maritime and special forces exercises provided opportunities to maintain channels of communication as well as handy benchmarking of each other’s capabilities in case of need. Critics may argue that this has been a waste of time and money, making little difference in Thailand’s political or domestic behaviour.

Yet it was not accidental that Australia’s investment in the relationship resulted in Thailand being the first ASEAN country to agree to support Australia’s efforts in East Timor. Bangkok supported Canberra in its hour of need during the dark days of early September 1999. Only after Thailand had committed forces and a deputy force commander, General Songkitti Jaggabatara, did other ASEAN countries agree to participate. Indeed, the Royal Thai Army infantry battalion that exercised alongside an Australian infantry company in Thailand in July 1999, as part of Exercise Chapel Gold, was the same battalion that joined the mission in East Timor a few months later. Such exercises were beneficial for honing the tactical proficiency and regional cultural awareness of Australian forces. They also enhanced Australia’s ability to harness regional partners in support of Australian regional security and stability initiatives.

Had it not been for the decades of defence investment in the bilateral relationship through exchanges, scholarships and exercises, Thailand would have been far more reluctant to commit forces to East Timor. In fact more than likely Australia would have been left friendless in its region. Similarly, Australia’s longstanding engagement with the Philippines proved its value when that country also contributed forces in 1999.

In the South Pacific, other than New Zealand (with its intimate ties and high levels of interoperability with Australian counterparts), Australia’s relationship with Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the most significant. Regular exchanges, shared training and exercises and a range of common interests continue to foster the bilateral relationship with the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF).

Although the PNGDF’s effectiveness and political reliability has been questioned, the strength of the bilateral relationship has proven particularly useful as a restraining influence on the PNGDF and for facilitating its participation in...
a number of Pacific-oriented operations notably in Solomon Islands and beyond. This has been defence diplomacy at its best. The new Commander of the PNGDF, Brigadier Gilbert Toropo, for instance, trained in Australia and served as an instructor at Duntroon in the mid-1990s. He is a man who is held in high regard by those who know him. He is the quintessential example of the utility of investing in defence diplomacy through scholarships, exchanges and exercises.

That’s all well and good, critics may say, but that was then and circumstances have changed. With the prominence of great power rivalry such efforts may come to be seen as trifling and marginal. I beg to differ.

The two large and new amphibious Landing Helicopter Dock ships (LHDs) coming into service are set to provide some of the most useful platforms for operating in and around Australia’s vast coastline and beyond. When at full operating capability, and working alongside complementary ADF elements, they will be versatile platforms for force projection. But short of such dire contingencies, there are creative ways they may be employed to bolster regional security and stability through some creative defence diplomacy.

First of all, the use of the LHDs should be tied in closely with Australia’s regional engagement and aid priorities–its flagship defence diplomacy activities. A reflection on US Navy and US Marine Corps experience is instructive. US Navy LHDs routinely conduct focused humanitarian assistance missions in places like Timor-Leste and Indonesia, earning immense goodwill while materially assisting the needy with construction, medical, dental and other support to local communities. These operations also happen to test a wide spectrum of military skills considered essential for complex warfighting, but which equally are valuable for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Australia’s experience with the acquisition of the C-17 aircraft is also instructive. Four C-17s were initially purchased for the RAAF and within weeks they were being used to deliver support after Cyclone Nargis in Burma in May 2008. They have also contributed significantly to the resupply of troops in Afghanistan. This demonstrated that by acquiring a new capability, the ADF could undertake relief tasks that simply could not have been contemplated previously. Similarly, with the imminent arrival of the LHDs many good reasons will emerge for having acquired them.

One such reason is that the ADF will be able to focus on projects mutually agreed with regional countries including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and a range of South Pacific Island states. Engagement on strategically chosen development assistance projects could generate considerable goodwill while bolstering security and stability. With the prospect of increased instability and environmental challenges, short notice calls for such assistance are more than likely. From now on, when considering response options in the face of a deteriorating security situation in Australia’s region, a significantly more flexible and adaptable capability will be available. Conversely, the very existence of Australia’s robust amphibious capability will act as a distinct deterrent, particularly in the South Pacific, in the knowledge that extreme action can be counteracted by a significant Australian force that could arrive at short notice. Defence diplomacy at its best.

In the meantime, as Australia looks to engage more closely with Indonesia and other ASEAN and South Pacific neighbours, their engineers, medical and logistic teams should be invited on-board the LHDs and alongside the Australian teams to deploy and carry out agreed-upon constructive tasks. This may well prove ground-breaking, literally and metaphorically. Such a capability is particularly significant when weighing up the security and stability calculus. On balance therefore, defence diplomacy can be expected to feature prominently in future ADF activities. In uncertain times such as these, a more useful and noble role for the ADF would be hard to find.

Policy recommendation
Investment in bilateral regional relationships through scholarships, exchanges and exercises can generate a surprising array of short and long-term dividends in personal relationships and in a willingness to collaborate on challenging operational tasks. Bilateral and multi-lateral military engagement on development assistance projects utilising the new amphibious ships should be encouraged, particularly with Indonesia, as well as PNG, Timor-Leste and beyond. The effect in terms of enhanced goodwill and mutual understanding could be literally and metaphorically ground-breaking.

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Call for caution: Why Australian forces keep being drawn to the Middle East and how it undermines Australia’s neighbourhood.

Australia has long struggled to balance military commitments in places like the Middle East with remaining prepared for future closer regional contingencies. The lure of a Middle East coalition contribution has been hard to resist for cover a century, particularly as national interests have not always correlated with proximity to Australia. Yet as the so-called Asian Century marches on and developments in our neighbourhood become more significant to Australia’s future prosperity, it is time for a more cautious approach to entanglement in distant adventures.

December 2014 marks the centenary of Australian troops’ arrival in Egypt early in World War I – in the lead up to Gallipoli in 1915 and subsequent military operations in Egypt, Palestine, the Levant and Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).

Again in World War II, Australians fought in the Middle East as loyal ‘sons of empire’, but also because Britain was Australia’s principal trading partner and principal protector against Japanese adventurism. Military commitments to secure the vital trade artery through the Suez Canal made sense at the time.

Australia’s substantial contribution there from 1940 to 1942 was rudely challenged by Japan’s thrust south in December 1941. The destruction of British naval power in the Indo-Pacific, the fall of Singapore in February 1942 and the incarceration of thousands as prisoners of war reinforced the need to focus on the neighbourhood.

Despite the significance of the Kokoda campaign in 1942, it was the American efforts in the Solomon Islands (at Guadalcanal) and combined Australian and American naval efforts in the Coral Sea and American naval forces in the battle of Midway that tipped the balance in the Pacific war. Since then Australia’s strategic security and prosperity made possible by the sacrifice made there by their American allies.

Since the mid-1950s Australian governments have been cautious about military contributions in the Middle East, while at the same time seeking to make selective, even at times token, contributions there to bolster US alliance ties and UN peacekeeping efforts.

Australia provided a small, calibrated Australian contribution to the Gulf War in 1990-91 to oust Saddam Hussein from invaded Kuwait. This reflected the Hawke government’s resolve to support multilateralist US instincts. The predominately naval contribution avoided having ‘boots on the ground’. Their decisions stemmed from a fear of politically-toxic effects of large potential casualties – a fear grounded in community polarisation over Australia’s 500 combat deaths during the Vietnam War (1962-1972).

In 2001 Australia joined the United States and others in routing the Taliban from Afghanistan in what was widely seen as a warranted intervention after Al Qaeda’s attacks on 11 September 2001. Following the American lead, Australia saw little need to remain closely engaged once the Taliban withdrew undefeated into the hills along Pakistan’s border – only for Australia and the coalition to be drawn back in after the Taliban returned in strength.

In the meantime, in 2003 Australia joined the ‘coalition of the willing’ in quickly defeating Saddam Hussein’s conventional forces. The Howard government deftly avoided committing to ‘phase four’ operations – the post conflict reconstruction. This was seen as something best left to the Americans
and the Iraqis to work out. Yet the rapid degeneration of the security situation there saw Australia virtually compelled to send a force back into Iraq in 2005. But once again it was a carefully-calibrated contribution, with responsibility to help largely confined to one Iraqi province and strict rules of engagement to minimise casualties and maximise returns on political capital invested in the alliance.

Howard may be criticised for committing to the invasion to burnish alliance credentials, but he can’t be faulted for having minimised the number of returning Australian ‘body bags’

Howard is also credited with significantly increasing the migrant intake – including from the Middle East. The make-up of Australian society today is noticeably different from 2003, let alone 1914 or 1940. In thinking through ramifications of Australia’s Middle East commitments, a significant additional factor today is the knock-on consequences at home. This applies also in the neighbourhood – noticeably with predominantly Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia, where firebrand mutations of militant Islam continue to sprout and where resident and visiting Australians face heightened alerts. Yet today few with authority or influence really understand the cultural and religious predispositions of those Australians with a Middle-Eastern heritage.

In 2005 Australia also was effectively compelled to return to Afghanistan, initially with a special forces task group and then with additional reconstruction and mentoring task groups and a range of other supporting elements. Conscious of the criticism of the casualty-averse strategy adopted in Iraq from 2005 until 2009, the Australian government adopted a more forthright approach to its force contribution in Afghanistan. Inevitably this approach generated far more casualties than the previous commitments to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Community debate continues over whether their sacrifice was worth it. But in honour of the investment in blood and treasure so far, and the potential consequences of destabilisation on fragile and nuclear-armed Pakistan if the situation deteriorates, there are compelling strategic arguments for remaining engaged. Even with the withdrawal from Oruzgan Province, that commitment sees 400 Australians, working alongside American and NATO partners, fostering the emergence of a self-sustaining Afghan nation.

Today in Iraq, however, the rationale for additional involvement is surely not as compelling. Support for the US alliance itself remains compelling, but without a clear strategy or plan for how to govern the space once ‘victory’ is declared, the situation involves significant risks and could degenerate further.

Shiite Iraq’s benefactors in Shiite Iran must be relieved and bemused at the West’s insistence at routing a Sunni-extremist group for them. Australia has committed a handful of super hornet fighter aircraft and support aircraft to bolster Iraqi forces’ ability to ‘roll back’ the so-called Islamic State.

In the absence of a coherent overarching strategy, Australia should hasten slowly in providing additional support. Australia’s special forces, its potential ‘boots on the ground’, may best be kept in reserve, particularly as most of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi Army lacks resolve to reclaim Sunni-dominated areas in northern and north-western Iraq, let alone hold and administer them fairly and judiciously.

Some contend Australian special forces could help bolster Iraqi proficiency. But the problem there is about will, not military proficiency. Experience suggests despite the best intentions, resolve is not about to return to the Iraqi Army. Following several years of mis-governing the Sunni heartlands of north-west Iraq, the predominantly Shiite Iraqi Army had very little local community support and
melted away in the face of a relatively rudimentary but determined Sunni force; the so-called Islamic State.

Images of decapitated British and American civilians have aroused strong emotional responses, despite the loss of an estimated 200,000 Syrian lives not having the same effect. These beheadings, it appears, were aimed at goading the West to respond and find itself once more entrapped in Iraq, where more suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices could sap the West of blood and treasure.

Despite repeated and ongoing Middle East deployments, Australians have never felt at home there. Apart from recent migrants, few Australians have any understanding of the culture, the languages, the world views and the politics at play there. Despite years of involvement, Australians have relied on the expertise and wisdom of others.

And what of the knock-on consequences back in Australia? Much is made of the concerns and even resentment in Australia’s Islamic community over recent events. How much of this can be apportioned to Australia’s actions there is hard to fathom. But unless explained and managed carefully, it won’t damp down enflamed emotions. A compelling argument posits that the West’s attacks against the so-called Islamic State help consolidate support behind them – even in Australia.

Australia’s commitment alongside US forces in the Middle East is largely about alliance imperatives. Yet circumstances have changed markedly since before the global financial crisis – an event which dramatically confirmed the re-emergence of China as a dominant global economic (and increasingly strategic) force. Regional relationships and strategic developments in East and South East Asia now matter even more.

Today the key differential that Australia offers its major ally is its knowledge of, and familiarity with its immediate region. Yet that familiarity has faded significantly since its heyday at the time of the East Timor intervention crisis in 1999. Further Middle East engagement is seeing the prospects fade for a return to regional engagement and defence diplomacy (i.e. engagement in relationships and trust-building, military exercises, personnel exchanges, scholarships and visits).

Australia’s Defence Minister, David Johnston, has rightly spoken about enhanced defence diplomacy as being a key enabler for regional security and stability. Yet most members of the ADF only have experience with the ‘sandpit’. Few nowadays have much more than a paper-thin understandings or experiences of South East Asia and the South Pacific, and their knowledge is getting thinner.

If this is the Asian century, Australian governments seem too easily distracted with problems elsewhere. The imminent delivery of the Navy’s amphibious landing helicopter dock ships (LHDs) provide an excellent platform for reinvigorating regional engagement and defence diplomacy through collaborative projects alongside regional partners. Imagine the goodwill and greater mutual familiarity that could be generated by collaborative engineering or health projects in remote parts of Indonesia, East Timor, PNG, the South Pacific or beyond.

In the meantime, Australia’s ready willingness to pivot back to the Middle East perhaps undermines remaining US resolve for engaging in its own ‘pivot’ or rebalance to Asia. Like primary-school soccer players, Australian policy and decision-makers have followed the ball back to Iraq, effectively walking away from other positions on the field. In balancing Australia’s national interests, the immediate utility of supporting US efforts in Iraq and Syria may end up having the opposite to the intended effect – encouraging deteriorating security and stability in East and South East Asia while making little real difference in the Middle East. Somebody in high office needs to think through the
potential ramifications of these prospects. The Prime Minister started his term in office advocating ‘more Jakarta and less Geneva’. We need a strategy that sees that approach materialise, even when some Middle East issues continue to distract.

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