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Submission: The recent expenditure of \$550 million on a fleet of reconditioned M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) to replace the Army's Leopard-1 tanks raises important questions for the future of the Army's armoured units. I believe there is real reason to doubt that maintaining a force of MBTs is in Australia's strategic, tactical and financial interests.

The Abrams tanks, and indeed any other modern heavyweight MBT, are singularly ill-suited to the kinds of missions which Australian forces have performed over the last decade. In the 1999 intervention in East Timor, the largest Australian deployment since Vietnam, we did not send our tanks to join in. MBTs are incapable of effective operation in areas like Timor-Leste due to the poor road infrastructure. They would therefore be limited to developed urban areas with proper roads, where their formidable firepower is such overkill that they are functionally useless.

In short, MBTs are useless for low-intensity interventions of the sort the ADF often undertakes. Such units are of use only in large-scale conventional conflicts. Even here, however, there is good reason to suggest that the maintenance of an MBT force cannot be rationally justified.

The Army possesses now just 59 Abrams units. This represents a significant reduction in numerical strength from the 100 Leopards that have been retired. 59 tanks is sufficient for no more than a handful of combat squadrons- perhaps two or three- with a training squadron. The need to rotate combat units out of action regularly for recuperation and maintenance means that the operational strength of Australian armour is likely to be even less. The experience of the two Gulf conflicts in 1991 and 2003 shows that armour must be deployed in significant numbers to be effective. Australia simply does not possess those numbers. Our squadrons would be reduced to working alongside friendly armoured units- which, due to the doctrine of interoperability being so focused on the United States, would in practice mean working alongside US armour. It is difficult to conceive a situation wherein the US Army or Marine Corps armoured units would be in urgent need of a small number of Australian tanks to support them.

Additional to the problem of numbers is the problem of deployment. Despite the investiture of many dollars in heavy air- and sea-lift capabilities, Australia will remain unable to rapidly deploy the Abrams squadrons in the kind of strength they are likely to be required in. We will therefore be reliant yet again on our allies- i.e., the United States, to provide the transport. Australia would be acting as part of a coalition of allied powers, and yet again it is difficult to see what appreciable contribution our small armoured strength would be able to make. Geography dictates that the land components of the ADF should be expeditionary- as an island nation, Australia's home defence rests on control of the sea, which in modern war means control of the air. The RAN and RAAF should be seen as the principle guardians of the Australian continent, and the Army as the expeditionary force which it has become.

Aside from the interoperability case, the previous government justified the Abrams purchase by pointing to the advantages an armoured force gives to infantry in terms of firepower and protection. This case would be more convincing were it not the case that no Australian tank has seen action since Vietnam. The Leopards which the Abrams replaced never fired a shot in anger. Despite this, Australian forces have undertaken many missions since Vietnam, often in hostile situations, and have acquitted themselves well despite lacking the support of Australian MBTs. Not only has this been apparent in environments such as Timor and the Solomons, but in the far more dangerous conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan where our forces have been fighting for seven years now without an Australian Army tank in sight.

The arguments for providing increased firepower and protection to infantry operations

are not wrong, but there is no reason to assume that an MBT is the only way to provide it. Our experience since Vietnam has shown that light armour is quite capable of providing these assets to our infantry. If the ASLAVs are considered incapable of fulfilling the role, Australian industry could develop a new middleweight armoured fighting vehicle. Other small armies, such as the Dutch with whom we already have a strong commercial relationship, are also coming to terms with the obsolescence of the MBT in their operations. A possible avenue exists for the collaborative development of a middleweight AFV. Such a vehicle would be more flexible in deployment and use than an MBT.

It is easy to understand why the Army maintains a tank force, but it is harder to justify it. Sentimentality is not a valid argument for this White Paper to consider. Infantry support has been fulfilled by other vehicles. It is true that phasing out heavy armour means losing a set of skills- but these are skills we have been doing without in operational practice for over thirty years. Moreover, there doubt about the future sustainability of the Army's tanks.

Each generation of military hardware is more expensive than the last. Despite spending over half a billion dollars, Australia has seen a major reduction in its MBT strength to the 59 Abrams. When the time comes to retire the Abrams, we will be faced with a hard choice- to even maintain an already-small armoured strength will require an even greater financial investment. To expand the strength will require yet more. With the trend of tank numbers decreasing, and tank costs increasing, it is difficult to see how the Army will be able to maintain a respectable heavy armour capability in future. It may be better to draw a line under heavy armour altogether and concentrate on the lighter, more flexible infantry support vehicles as suggested above and which experience has shown us to be in more need of.

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