Future conflict and its implications for personnel in the
Australian Defence Force

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It is of immense importance that the soldier, high or low, whatever rank he has, should not have to encounter in War those things which, when seen for the first time, set him in astonishment and perplexity; if he has only met with them one single time before, even by that he is half acquainted with them.

Carl von Clausewitz

Introduction

1. The Chief of the Australian Defence Force, General Peter Cosgrove, states that ‘the ADF fundamentally relies on people, [and] human performance determines the limits of every aspect of what we do’. Clausewitz’ opening remark tempers this by emphasising the importance of preparing military personnel for the future. An inherent difficulty with these observations, however, is accurately predicting the types of future conflict the ADF might face. Nevertheless, by linking the state of today’s affairs with an assessment of key driving forces of tomorrow we may actually know more about the future than we realise.

2. One possibility about future conflict is that it will involve ADF personnel in a series of complex extremes ranging from traditional situations to the non-traditional, such as from conventional warfighting to counter-asymmetric operations. By locating these extremes the ADF can identify opportunities to ensure that personnel challenges, especially training and recruitment, are addressed to meet future operational requirements. As recently stated by General Cosgrove, we must be ‘committed to shaping the ADF so that it remains in future, what it has been in the past’.

3. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the potential impact of future conflict on personnel within the ADF. The paper will begin by describing several assumptions regarding future conflict. Following this, the nature of future conflict will be examined using an Alternative Futures Methodology (AFM). Finally, the implications of future conflict on ADF personnel will be discussed.

Assumptions

4. In order to examine future conflict it is important to clarify several issues. Future conflict involving the ADF is defined as any ‘combat against a recognisable enemy for a specific purpose’ over the next quarter century. To support this definition, several assumptions regarding Australia’s environment and conflict out to 2028 are listed below:

   a. International law will remain a governing influence on democratic societies.
   b. Australia will remain a medium power within a region of smaller powers, with the ADF’s four strategic tasks from Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force broadly enduring.
   c. Regardless of technological developments, ‘the essence of war will not change ... There will be casualties, carnage and death; it will not be like a video game’.
d. Success in battle will continue to require an exploitation of war’s enduring features (friction, danger and uncertainty) and variables (human interaction, the physical domain, innovation and chance).  

**Future conflict 2028**

5. A significant body of work already exists on the general nature and impact of future conflict. In 1991 Martin Van Creveld wrote that ‘the rise of low-intensity conflict may, unless it can be quickly contained, end up destroying the state’. Eight years later Ralph Peters mentioned that ‘thanks to a unique confluence of breaking empire, overcultivated Western consciences, and a worldwide cultural crisis, the warrior is back, as brutal as ever and distinctly better armed’. The ADF’s recent 2020 Objective Force Environment paper includes aspects of the previous two writers and suggests that in the future Australia is likely to face ‘a mixture of traditional and non-traditional threats’ within our region. Overall these examples support credibly written arguments. However, their differences are important and indicate that in order to identify detailed future conflict implications for the ADF, a specifically tailored description of the future conflict environment is required.

6. To describe future conflict implications for ADF personnel, an approach derived from the AFM has been used. The AFM is a long-range planning concept that can assist our understanding of plausible future conditions and how to prepare for them. It involves a series of steps to identify organisational issues, estimate key future driving forces, create scenarios and interpret the implications. This concept has assisted many large organisations and ‘can lead to powerful insights into the mysteries of the future’. However, the technique has also received criticism for ‘its lack of quantitative rigour, the often flaky nature of proponents and the flowery language that characterises many scenario exercises’. On balance, the AFM was selected due to its value as a way to contemplate the future in a structured, rather than ad hoc, fashion.

7. In this case, the AFM provides a basis to identify likely extremes in order to determine potential conflict scenarios of the future. The method was made up of three broad stages: the identification of basic issues, a description of possible future scenarios and a study of the implications of the issues and scenarios identified. The first two stages will now be described, leading to a discussion of the implications of future conflict on personnel within the ADF.

**Basic issues**

8. The first stage identified the key organisational issue to be studied (personnel) and the major change drivers within future conflict. Personnel was selected as the issue given its assessed critical importance yet enduring vulnerability to conflict. Given personnel’s many diverse factors, the force generation issues of recruitment and training were specifically identified as important in mitigating future conflict’s many potential effects.

9. Having confirmed personnel as the key issue, two major change drivers regarding future conflict were identified:

a. **The Degree of Asymmetry.** The Australian Army defines asymmetry as ‘military actions against an adversary to which he may have no effective response and which pit strength against weakness, sometimes in a non-traditional and unconventional manner’. Asymmetry’s extremes range from fighting in a terrorist setting where suicidal actions are expected to fighting in a more conventional setting where the Laws of Armed Conflict are observed. As the first change driver, it has potential to
create high degrees of conflict uncertainty with a correspondingly significant effect on personnel.

b. **Casus Belli.** Clausewitz’ *On War* proposes ‘a wonderful trinity’\(^{20}\) comprised of the people, the Army and government. Within the trinity, war is dependent on the passion of the people, the ability of the Army and the political objectives of the government. As a change driver to describe the perception of the Australian and international communities, *Casus Belli*\(^{21}\) is an enduring factor used to invoke the people’s passion for conflict. Its extremes may range from full domestic and international support, to little or no support. Although it is expected that any future conflict involving the ADF will generally require at least the Australian people’s initial support, this support may fluctuate depending on the success and/or length of the conflict.

**Possible future scenarios**

10. Having identified the issue and change drivers of future conflict, the second stage combined the change drivers at their extremes to create four possible conflict scenarios (see Figure 1 below). The scenarios are described as follows:

**Figure 1: ADF 2028 Future Conflict Planning Space**

![Figure 1: ADF 2028 Future Conflict Planning Space](image-url)
a. **Terror Cove.** This future conflict scenario involves protracted combat in an asymmetric environment with ADF actions supported by the Australian people. The threat is intelligent, irrational and possesses weapons of mass destruction. The ADF is likely to witness mass civilian casualties and people movements. The threat, similar to the growth of organised crime in Albania in the 1990s,22 has ingrained itself into a locality despite international attempts at financial intervention.

b. **First Blood.** The ADF is involved in a major pre-emptive operation based on the Entry from Air and Sea concept23 against a largely unknown yet asymmetric threat. The conflict is expected to be violent, outcomes may be unclear and the operation will quickly lose the support of the Australian people. Personnel will be shielded from the media during the operation and on their return to Australia. The ‘host’ state will sponsor international condemnation of the ADF, but will be unable to resist ADF occupation.

c. **Rice Wars.** Conventional conflict occurs motivated by globalised resource issues, but is not supported by the Australian people regardless of a multilateral coalition environment or the government’s interpretation of Australia’s national interest. The conflict might require an element of mobilisation and conscription. The people will be unable to distinguish between the actions of the military and the intent of the government.

d. **Air–Sea Denial.** Conventional conflict occurs along the lines of a Defence of Australia scenario. ADF involvement is well supported and deployed personnel are treated as heroes. Aspects of mobilisation, such as taxes and rationing, are supported. Foreign troops are stationed on Australian soil with significant local economic benefits.

11. Based on the driving forces, each scenario indicates potential issues of concern for the future. The scenarios also provide benefit in that their descriptions help to identify supplementary issues not indicated by the drivers, such as the role of media. However, since a scenario similar to **Air–Sea Denial** has been under consideration by the ADF since the Dibb Review of 1986,24 this scenario will not be examined further. The opposite scenario of **First Blood** will also not be examined given that its combined, negative, extremes of Asymmetry and Casus Belli may confuse the analysis of their implications for the ADF. Instead, the remainder of this paper will focus on the implications of the opposing **Terror Cove** and **Rice Wars** scenarios.

12. Both **Terror Cove** and **Rice Wars** are considered possible in the potential geopolitical climate of the next 25 years. The ADF, therefore, needs to be able to deal with their extremes. Given that the primary determinant of personnel’s performance in conflict is their ability to deal with the stressors produced by the environment, the ADF will need to recruit and train the right personnel to meet the threats of both **Terror Cove** and **Rice Wars**.

**Personnel implications for the ADF**

13. The above section has identified personnel and its associated functions, training and recruitment, as important issues for the ADF in future conflict. It has also determined two possible scenarios for study: **Terror Cove** and **Rice Wars**. The remainder of this paper will examine these scenarios and discuss their implications on personnel training and recruitment.
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Terror Cove

14. The scenario of Terror Cove highlights the need for the ADF to structure for asymmetric threats in addition to more traditional, conventional threats. A key feature of asymmetric warfare, from the personnel perspective, is its stressful and unpredictable nature due to its primary aim of creating a disproportionate effect through surprise and dislocation. A primary cause of stress in the Terror Cove environment will be the perception of lacking control or feeling helpless. An important debate in international militaries is whether personnel who are trained for conventional operations can also cope with asymmetric warfare. Experience in a range of conflict environments, and especially now in Afghanistan, shows that conventional troops can conduct operations against asymmetric threats, however the real difficulties may be in maintaining, rotating and retaining these personnel over time.

15. Behavioural research suggests that asymmetric conflict like Terror Cove may be more stressful than traditional conflict, as personnel may be exposed to a more diverse range of potentially traumatic or unexpected stimuli. A group of United States researchers cite the case study of an American soldier who had experienced life-threatening situations in traditional combat roles on operational deployment, but only developed debilitating post-operational stress reactions after exposure to a situation where he was unable to alleviate the suffering of starving children.

16. **Training implications.** If personnel in the future conflicts are to deal with the asymmetric extreme of Terror Cove, while maintaining a capacity for more conventional conflict, then training needs to ensure that they perceive or believe that they are well prepared and able to cope in a range of situations. Our traditional approach of over-learning to engender instinctive reactions does not result in innovation, and there is evidence to suggest that skills learned will quickly degrade (it has been suggested this contributed to the high number of unauthorised discharges during Operation CITADEL in East Timor).

17. A training alternative is to provide realistically stimulated environments that can increase personnel self-efficacy or confidence to deal with the unexpected. Promising work in the aviation human factors domain shows that the performance of aircrews in high-risk and high-stress conditions can be improved by enhancing a range of basic communication, interpersonal and situational awareness skills. Interestingly, research also suggests that this form of stimulation does not need to be high fidelity or overtly realistic—it just needs to expose personnel to the unexpected in a situation where they are able to demonstrate they can cope. Training that balances fundamental military skills while encouraging innovation at the team and individual levels, would assist not only with asymmetric operations, but also contribute to recently identified complex warfighting requirements for versatility and agility.

18. **Recruiting implications.** Expected demographic changes within Australia pose a challenge for defence over the next 20–25 years due to a decreasing traditional recruiting pool. The asymmetric emphasis of Terror Cove, however, when combined with popular support, suggests that demographic change could be developed into a strength for the ADF.

19. It has been argued that the smaller numbers of suitable young male applications will result in a need to recruit more mature applicants, as well as women and a more diverse range of ethnic groups. Importantly though, the United Nations have found that soldiers from these groups can be more effective in non-traditional roles where there is a greater need to engage the local population. Women peacekeepers in particular have been found to be more successful in this area. The ADF, therefore, should be smart in its employment of these groups in order to maximise their utility.
20. It is important to note, however, that whether these groups are more successful due to their background or their employment area is not currently understood. In most militaries these groups are traditionally employed in combat support and, therefore, undergo different employment training and indoctrination to combat soldiers. Experimentation and research is needed to determine whether the ADF would benefit most from specialised humanitarian units, or whether modified training with a more diverse group will achieve the same result.

Rice Wars

21. In contrast to Terror Cove’s asymmetric challenge, the major issue in Rice Wars is the people’s perception of Casus Belli. An important lesson of the Vietnam War was the significant negative impact that a lack of popular support has on deployed personnel. As a result of alliance commitments and the need to protect Australian interests in a scenario like Rice Wars, future conflict may incur varying popular support from the Australian population. In Iraq, during Operation FALCONER, the ADF was fortunate that the media and population were generally supportive, even though some portions of the population did not agree with government policy. It is unlikely that this will always be the case in the future.

22. Furthermore, behavioural researchers have shown that belief in the mission can help buffer stress reactions. Field Marshal Sir William Slim in his reflections on the essentials of morale states that ‘there must be a great and noble object for a soldier to fight effectively’. Therefore, the ADF needs doctrine and training that can balance the extremes of low or high support for the government’s justification for the war.

23. **Training implications.** Fundamentally, the management of Casus Belli is a leadership issue that needs to be dealt with effectively at all levels. Therefore future leadership training in the ADF needs to incorporate training in information management, media management, non-military organisation management and training in the management of troops on return to Australia as discussed below:

   a. **Information management.** The ADF currently conducts predeployment training, however, there appears to be no doctrinal articulation of the commander’s role in establishing a mission’s legitimacy. Commanders need to be trained to prepare personnel for deployment because the popular media cannot be relied on to provide a balanced source of political and cultural information. This approach is important as it can provide meaning to personnel and enhance their feelings of control, thus reducing the likelihood of culture shock or combat stress reactions.

   b. **Media management.** With increasing technology the media will become even more pervasive in future conflict. All personnel need to learn to deal with this group effectively. To assist this, the embedding of journalists into combat units during training could lessen the impact of the media during operations. It could also positively shape journalists by increasing their understanding of ADF tactics and procedures.

   c. **Non-military organisation management.** Rice Wars (as well as Terror Cove) will require commanders to deal with ‘numerous involved on-lookers’. Not just the media, but other government departments and non-government organisations. To ease this situation and ensure a whole-of-government/whole-of-nation approach we may see significantly increased developmental exchanges between the ADF, other government departments and industry.
d. **Return to Australia management.** This issue concerns the retention of personnel after a deployment rotation. During the Vietnam War soldiers could transit from the operational theatre to a pub in Sydney in less than two days. This process resulted in many serious adjustment problems, especially in the hostile political climate of the times. The ADF is currently trialling different strategies for effective psychological debriefing and decompression after deployment. It is important that this research continues and that officers and commanders are informed of the resulting strategies to reduce adjustment problems.

24. **Recruiting implications.** To maximise the potential for recruitment in the future the ADF may need to provide greater assurance on entry for personnel on the type of operations in which they are likely to deploy. Some applicants may be motivated to be part of ‘homeland security’ but not ‘expeditionary’ units.

25. Currently people do not join the ADF until they are second or third generation Australians. One possible reason is that the parents of first generation immigrants will not encourage their children to join an organisation which might send them overseas, potentially to fight against their country of origin. By guaranteeing enlistment for homeland security the ADF may maximise enlistment numbers and ensure a more ethnically representative population.

26. One possible way to reduce future apprehensions to joining is through restructuring Reserve service. Interestingly, a guarantee to limit service to Australia may sponsor a return to ADF conditions of service before changes in the Defence Act of 1903 (in 2001) removed restrictions on Reserve service overseas. Importantly, however, this approach would allow applicants to make an informed choice and reduce the potential for personnel to become involved in conflict for which they are not morally or ethically prepared.

**Conclusion**

27. Future conflict is likely to be characterised by extremes. In an attempt to predict the nature of these extremes for the ADF, the AFM was used to determine possible driving influences and their interaction to create potential future conflict scenarios. The change drivers of Asymmetry and Casus Belli were identified as fundamental in shaping the nature of future conflict. When combined, these drivers create plausible future scenarios involving the ADF. Two scenarios, Terror Cove and Rice Wars, were selected for their opposing implications on ADF personnel.

28. In analysing the two scenarios, lessons were drawn from the most unfavourable change driver in each case. For Terror Cove, asymmetry prevails as the primary issue and will require the ADF to structure for asymmetric conflict in addition to retaining a traditional, conventional capability. Asymmetric problems may be alleviated through training to increase the confidence of personnel in asymmetric environments, and by expanding the effective recruiting pool to take advantage of the cultural skills of recently arrived immigrants. Within Rice Wars, the unpopular extreme of the Casus Belli change driver dominates. Its effects can be lessened through training that reinforces an understanding amongst ADF commanders of the legitimacy of deployments. In addition, recruiting hesitancy could be overcome by allowing prospective personnel the choice to join either units designated to deploy overseas, or units that will be limited to local homeland roles only.

29. The ADF has an obligation to prepare its personnel for future conflict. The Terror Cove and Rice Wars scenarios present extreme conflict situations that are considered plausible for the ADF out to the year 2028. However, their recognition also provides an opportunity for the ADF to prepare. The
opposing demands of asymmetric conflict, as well as variations in the popular support for military action can be mitigated through training that empowers personnel and by recruiting measures that are attractive to non-traditional groups. By addressing these issues in coming years, the ADF can help support the Chief of Defence Force’s recent commitment ‘to shaping the ADF so that it remains in future, what it has been in the past’.

Endnotes

5. JR Hill, 1986, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, Croom Helm, London, p. 20. Medium powers are said to lie between the ‘self-sufficient and the insufficient’. A common characteristic of medium powers is their aspiration for autonomy (p. 27). A medium power seeks to ‘create and keep under national control enough means of power to initiate and sustain coercive actions whose outcome will be the preservation of its vital interests’ (p. 21).
16. Australian Army, 2002, *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, op. cit., p. 95 describes Personnel as a Fundamental Input to Capability that consists of the following factors: appropriate authorised establishments; trained, motivated and ready ADF individuals; requisite individual competencies; organisational performance standards; Australian Defence Organisation directed retention and development goals; and supporting pay systems.
17. ibid., p. 92 describes Force Generation as ‘the process of recruiting, training, organising and equipping suitable personnel and forces for specified roles, tasks, operational viability periods within designated warning times’.
18. ibid., p. 11.
19. Within the spectrum of the Asymmetry change driver, traditional conflict includes the use of battlefield manoeuvre by either side. Despite manoeuvre theory’s asymmetric connotations, it is considered to be a legitimate and conventional use of military force.
21. ‘Casus belli’ is Latin for *an event that provokes, leads to or is used to justify a war*. In deciding to go to war, the government generally presents a casus belli to the people.


31. C Wilson, H Braithwaite & P Murphy, op. cit., pp. 30–2. The basic skills identified include communication, decision-making, leadership, situation awareness, adaptability, interpersonal relations, cultural awareness and performance monitoring.

32. loc. cit.


40. C Wilson, H Braithwaite & P Murphy, op. cit., pp. 15–6.


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