Defence’s current geographical posture has been shaped by a range of factors and events, including changes in Australia’s defence strategy since Federation, mobilisation for the First and Second World Wars, and Australia’s demographic and economic profile. From the colonial period to the 1960s, force posture reflected priorities such as the coastal defence of major centres in Southern and Eastern Australia, imperial defence and expeditionary operations, or ‘forward defence’ alongside the UK and US in Southeast Asia.

Changes in Australian defence strategy from the late 1960s to the 1980s emphasised a more self-reliant approach to the defence of Australia. This resulted in substantial rebalancing of our force disposition and posture. Early steps in the 1970s and 1980s were:

a. the Air Force completed the construction of its first bare bases in the North and North West at Katherine (Tindal) and Exmouth (Learmonth) in the early 1970s;

b. the Navy commissioned HMAS Stirling in 1978 to provide it with a secondary fleet base on the West coast; and

c. the Army established the Regional Force Surveillance Units (NORFORCE in 1981, the Pilbara Regiment in 1985 and 51st Far North Queensland Regiment in 1987) to conduct long range reconnaissance and surveillance patrols in the North and North West.

This new direction in force posture was reinforced in the 1987 Defence White Paper, which was informed by Paul Dibb’s 1986 Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities (the Dibb Review). The 1987 White Paper placed a higher priority on the requirements for the ADF to conduct defence-in-depth operations in Australia’s Northern and Western approaches. Key decisions and announcements relating to force posture included:

a. the establishment of a ‘Two Ocean Navy’ posture, involving the development of HMAS Stirling as a major fleet base, with the long-term objective of basing half of the Navy's fleet in the West;

b. the decision that HMAS Stirling should become Navy’s main submarine base, to be closer to the submarines’ main operating areas;

c. increasing Army’s presence in Northern Australia, with the decision to relocate the 2nd Cavalry Regiment from Sydney to Darwin (as recommended by the Dibb Review, the White Paper also flagged the relocation of 1 Brigade to Darwin as a longer-term option);

d. the establishment of RAAF Base Tindal as a permanent forward base for Air Force’s air combat capability, following the return to Australia of the RAAF fighter squadron previously based in Malaysia; and

e. the construction of an additional bare base at Scherger, to give Air Force a chain of forward bases across the North.

Posturing for operations in the North and North West also involved adjustments in the ADF’s training exercises. Beginning with ‘Kangaroo 83’ in
the Kimberley-Pilbara region, exercises in North West Australia and the Top End were incorporated into the ADF’s major joint exercise program.

The 1987 White Paper was followed by Robert Cooksey’s 1988 Review of Australia’s Defence Facilities. The Cooksey Review’s recommendations aimed to ensure that Defence basing and infrastructure was aligned with strategic guidance and the White Paper’s key outcomes, and rationalise existing facilities to achieve greater efficiencies.

While the Dibb and Cooksey Reviews supported increased operational basing in the north and west, they also concluded that there were enduring reasons why a number of major bases and support facilities should remain located in the South and East. They identified advantages such as reduced vulnerability to attack, lower operating costs and better infrastructure support as a key reason for retaining capability generation bases and facilities in traditional locations. At the same time, Dibb and Cooksey stressed that Defence needed a logistics and infrastructure capacity that would allow ADF operations and forward bases in the North and West to be supported from facilities in the South and East.