

Saving the nation

or serving the government?

Ric Smith

Changing uses of armed forces

In looking at the Asia Pacific region as a whole, and especially at South East Asia, it is tempting to conclude that military forces are playing a lesser role in government today than they were, say, 30 years ago. That would be a generally fair conclusion, notwithstanding the fact that, even in the past two years, there have been military-led coups in two countries in the region, and in a third the military has adopted a controlling role in national affairs pending the resolution of a messy political situation.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, military forces differ significantly in the ways they serve their nations, and in the governance frameworks within which they exist. Some are like the Australian Defence Force (ADF), which is subordinate to civil authority both constitutionally and in practice. In other cases the armed forces have a much greater role in governing the nation and indeed in its political life. In some cases of course this derives from the fact that military forces, as a result of their role in the birth of their nation, have retained a kind of implicit overwatch on political life.

Traditionally, or in the classic models, armed forces have existed in order to be able to defend or deter attacks on their country's territory or other aspects of its sovereignty. In this model, decisions about the size of the force, how it is structured and what capabilities it needs are based on assessments of the nature of any threat that might be faced and analysis of how best to defeat or deter it. In some cases, this sort of assessment and analysis process is sophisticated and rigorous, while in other cases it is instinctive and based on historical experience and less tangible considerations. Always, of course, economic conditions help shape decisions about force size and structure and equipment. It remains as true today as ever it was that you cannot talk about strategy without talking about budgets.

Historically, what I have called this traditional or classical approach has been based on assumptions about the prospects of state-on-state conflict. This is however a subject in which the assumptions are changing in many parts of the world.

Several factors are affecting this change. At the strategic level, the nature of global strategic issues is changing. One result of this is that armed conflict between nations has

become rare. Whereas national security was once mainly about securing one's state against threats from other states, it is now much more about security against different kinds of threats, including all those non-state actors we talk about. In addition, there is it seems a greater readiness on the part of some governments at least to use military forces to tackle problems that are not necessarily military in nature.

Strategic background

Strategic analysts, those who focus on the big picture, talk about the strategic power shifts occurring in the Asia-Pacific region and their potentially destabilising effects. It has been said that the rise of Asia has been the most important global historical trend of the last 100 years, and that it is likely to prove as significant in reshaping world affairs as the industrial revolution in Western Europe was in the 18th and 19th centuries and the first part of the 20th century. Asia's rise is of course far from complete, and the strategic issues arising from it are still being played out, but even at this stage they must be judged significant.

Whenever a new power arises, so the historians tell us, the existing powers will feel challenged. The question then is, how will they respond to that sense of feeling challenged? By trying to defeat that challenge? By trying to contain it? By embracing it? By adjusting their own posture, or even by embracing the change and seeking to benefit from it? Or by a mix of all these strategies? These are the issues the strategic thinkers are wrestling with in relation to this region.

At the next level down, the analysts have been in a more or less continuing state of anxiety for at least 30 years about a range of conventional issues or 'flash-points' which are seen to have the potential to cause conflict in the future, mostly because they have in the past. The list includes, among other issues, Kashmir, with which India and Pakistan remain preoccupied; the South China Sea, in which territorial disputes involving several nations abound; the Taiwan issue; and North Korea. These issues have been on the regional security agenda for decades, and continue to exercise security analysts and, in varying degrees at different times, government officials.

Yet, despite all this wariness about the shifts in the tectonic plates of the Asia-Pacific region's strategic landscape, and the continuing concerns about the region's so called 'flash points', the fact is that there has not actually been a state-on-state conflict, or even a new civil war, in Asia since 1979.

At a conference of military and other security experts in Canberra in 2005 Kishore Mahbubani, a former Secretary of Singapore's Foreign Ministry and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, caught our attention when he said 'east of Mumbai, the guns are silent'.

The 1970s saw three costly conflicts in Asia – the first in Vietnam, the second between India and Pakistan, and the third between China and Vietnam. Since then, a generation has passed without armed conflict between nations in Asia. This is quite remarkable when you look back on the 100 years that preceded it. It is also of course in stark contrast with the region 'west of Mumbai', which remains the world's great cauldron of conflict and both strategic and ideological tension.

It is not my purpose here explore in detail the reasons why we have enjoyed such a protracted absence of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. It is worth noting, however, that the beginning of this peaceful era coincides very closely with the decisions of Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese leadership in 1978-1979 to take a new direction in China's economic development. It has been a period in which governments in the region have focused heavily on economic interests and decisions and have seen the benefits of this for their national economies.

These 30 or so years have also been characterised by the increasing effectiveness and credibility of regional consultative forums. This applies not least to ASEAN, which while not in itself facilitating dispute resolution, has at least brought regional governments together. Since the 1990s, APEC and other forms of regional dialogue and summitry have also played a part. While often disparaged as 'talk shops', these forums have nevertheless enabled government leaders to talk directly to each other in an environment in which particular issues are seen in wider contexts. They have helped define a set of regional interests which governments have been able to place above national self interest.

In short, for most governments in the Asia-Pacific region, the status quo has been kind and there are strong disincentives to disrupting it.

This said, no government in the region has yet been willing to forego the insurance provided by a capable military force or to declare what in another time might have been called a 'peace dividend'. Nor would I expect them to do so. The continued commitment to prudence in this regard is reflected in the fact that, even after a generation of no conflict, military expenditure in the region continues to grow. Indeed, it seems that almost every country in the Asia Pacific region has grown its defence budget over the past decade. Some of this growth has been required to meet the increasing personnel costs experienced in most countries as a consequence of their economic growth, but there has also been an increase in capability generally as new generations of equipment have been ordered or acquired.

Some might see it as ironic that military budgets should grow as they have in a time so free of conflict. But governments clearly judge that the present peace cannot be guaranteed forever, and that slowing down their military development is not a gamble they can afford to take.

One can also envisage strategic writers arguing that the continuing peace has actually been underwritten by the fact that most states have been able to maintain credible military deterrence capabilities. This may indeed be the case, though it is of course a self-serving and often unprovable argument.

My own perspective is that governments have for the most part continued to increase their military spending partly for strategic reasons and partly because, as I will argue, they are in fact in many cases asking more of their forces in a number of respects. It is also the case, I am sure, that many are spending more simply because they can – that is, because the economic good times have enabled them to do so. To put it another way, as the national cake has grown, military forces and defence departments have wanted to see their slices grow too. And of course, even if there hasn't quite been an arms race, there has been an element of 'keeping up with the Joneses', of acquiring capabilities for symbolic reasons.

Changing nature of security threats

The second factor is the changing nature of perceived security threats to national security. The threats are seen now to come not so much from the armed forces of other states, but rather from a wider range of sources and in particular from non-state actors. They are often seen also to be international in nature, and to have their origins in situations of civil governance breakdown.

The range of non-state actors will be familiar to you – terrorists of course, but also pirates; smugglers of people, arms and drugs; organised criminal gangs; and so on. And the sorts of situations which it is feared might give rise to non-conventional challenges to international security include those in failed or feeble states, such as Afghanistan was when al-Qa'eda took root there.

Much has been written and spoken about the nature and origins and indeed the 'root causes' of new security challenges. Analysts have noted the effects of globalisation in enabling easier communication among disaffected groups, thus facilitating, for instance, the effective franchising of terrorism. Globalisation has also enhanced access to some forms of weaponry and to the means of applying asymmetric power, and has facilitated the working of international criminal networks.

Readiness to deploy forces

Beyond these changes there is also, I would argue, an increasing readiness on the part of many governments to use military forces to tackle problems that are not military in nature or origin, and in some cases that do not involve any security dimension at all. This is not a new practice, but it does seem that among governments like ours in Australia

there is a new level of willingness to deploy forces at home and abroad to take on problems where civil authorities have not succeeded or do not have the resources to succeed.

Cynics might suggest that this is a manifestation of the adage 'if the only tool you've got is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail'. But military force is a necessary response to some of the new types of threats to international security. That threats are coming from sources other than formed military units does not mean that military force is not the appropriate means for tackling them, only that it must be applied differently.

The fact is that few if any police forces in the world can bring to bear the sort of power that is sometimes needed in the early stages of what we now call 'stabilisation operations' or in response to large scale breakdowns of civil order of the kind we have seen in some African states and, in our own region, in the Solomon Islands and East Timor.

It seems also to be increasingly widely recognised that no government can act alone outside its own borders. Governments generally recognise that if they are to deploy forces abroad, it is best to do so in co-operation with other governments. This reflects in part, of course, a concern, when acting internationally, to want to be in 'good company', and to be able to share both the political and financial burdens. More broadly, I would also see it in part as one further result of the 'shrinking' of the world which has arguably led to a greater need, scope and capability for collective or co-operative responses to international conflicts or to problems that might become international security challenges, and indeed to natural disasters.

Commensurate with this, we are also seeing some examples of governments which face domestic problems asking for help from abroad. In recent times Australia, for example, has responded to three separate requests from regional governments for help in the face of law and order problems which had their origins in domestic political conflict.

The net effect of these three changes – new strategic circumstances, new kinds of threats, and a greater willingness to use or request military forces in non-military situations – has been to change the uses which are being made of armed forces and indeed often the frequency of their deployment.

The experiences of the ADF over the last few years bear this out.

Operational tempos and lessons

For the ADF, the 25 years which followed the end of the deployment to Vietnam in 1972 were relatively quiet. In all, some 40 separate operations were undertaken, mostly UN and other multinational peacekeeping activities. Some, like the deployments to Namibia (1989-90), Cambodia (1991-93) and Somalia (1992-93), were relatively large and demanding, but they were generally predictable, allowed plenty of planning time, and were optional but uncontroversial.

It is sometimes said that the new era began for Australia with the preparation for the intervention in East Timor in 1999, though perhaps in retrospect the Namibia, Cambodia and Somalia deployments were harbingers of the change.

At all events, since 1999 Australia has deployed more than 90,000 defence force personnel on overseas operations, a vastly increased tempo compared with the 25 years before 1999. Currently, some 4000 members of the 53,000-strong force are on operational deployments in Australia, its territorial waters or overseas at any one time.

Three points in particular are worth making about Australian operations over the last decade.

Widespread deployments

The first is that they have been geographically widespread. They have ranged from Australia itself and its territorial seas to the Solomon Islands and Tonga in the South Pacific, to Iraq and Lebanon in the Middle East, to Afghanistan in central Asia and to Sudan in Africa.

Diverse nature of operations

Second, the operations have also differed widely in their nature. In Iraq, we have at times been at the highest ends of modern warfare, and in Afghanistan too the fighting has been fierce and involved some of the worst of modern weaponry. But in four of the deployments we are particularly proud of – to Bougainville, to Bali after the bombings in 2002 and 2005 and to Sumatra after the tsunami – no weapons were taken ashore, while in Solomon Islands, where we had nearly two thousand personnel deployed at one time, there was barely a shot fired in anger.

Policy-rich operations

Third, in almost all cases recent deployments have also been what I call 'policy-rich' operations. This term embraces several elements. In many cases, the operations were optional, that is, matters of policy choice in which the Government could have chosen either to do them or not to do them, and could decide the size and nature of our deployment. The emergency responses to the Bali bombings in 2002, when 202 people (including 88 Australians) were killed and hundreds injured, and again in 2005, were probably cases in which we had no practical choice but to move quickly with everything we could help with. The response to the tsunami in late 2004 was another case in which we had no real choice but to do something, though quite a lot of choice about what we did and where. For the rest, there was always an *a priori* question of choice which rested on the policy benefits the Government identified in any proposed operation.

There are other senses too in which what we have been doing is 'policy rich'. In three of the ADF's deployments – those to Solomon Islands, East Timor and Tonga – we were in fact responding to requests from governments for help in stabilising lawless situations. Interestingly, in two cases the government concerned changed, as a result of elections, after we deployed, and in one of these cases (Solomon Islands) the new government was less than fulsome in its support for the presence of the regional coalition, though the people themselves remained very supportive.

As well, in almost all cases our deployments required us to work either with other governments or with the UN or both.

That in itself requires complicated policy negotiations about command arrangements, rules of engagement, the handling of prisoners or detainees, media management, and so on.

Further, and very importantly, most of our recent deployments have required us to work with other agencies of our own Government, which in turn has required decisions about leadership of the mission, the boundaries of activity, funding and so on. As a reflection of the complexities, in neither the intervention in Solomon Islands nor the Bali response was the ADF the lead agency, though it was the largest contributor of people in both cases.

In some ways, working out these arrangements, for instance with police, overseas aid, foreign affairs, immigration, customs and quarantine authorities and agencies, was quite demanding because our cultures and experience and approaches to command and management are quite different. These differences had to be reconciled if we were to operate effectively together. Along the way Defence had to coach some of our government colleagues carefully about what they could reasonably expect, or not expect, from the ADF. Equally, the ADF had to learn a lot about the legal and other constraints under which other organisations work.

These experiences have demonstrated three things very clearly – the added value from effective inter-operability with other agencies of government, especially the Federal Police; the adaptability and agility of the mostly conventionally-trained ADF units; and – above all – the importance of effective co-ordination at the national policy level. These are lessons that other regional governments have noted with interest.

Beyond this, many of the ADF's deployments have been 'policy rich' in the broader sense that we have been seeking both military and civil outcomes, or sometimes just civil and humanitarian outcomes, from our operations. The objectives of the deployment of force in many cases have been 'more malleable than absolute', and our forces, where they have been fighting, have been doing so amongst people and against often elusive enemies who in almost none of the cases have existed in formed military units. It has also been a characteristic of many of these deployments that there has been no clear, pre-agreed 'end state' or point at which we could say the job has been done.

The effect of all this has been that while operational success has been very evident, the strategic objective, however ill-defined, has been more elusive. In some cases, we have had to accept the reality that we will never get to a situation in which we can say that we have won; rather, we will be talking about degrees of success or failure – a very frustrating notion for military people, I know, but one they have to accept.

Some will recognise in this commentary points very similar to those expressed by General Sir Rupert Smith in his book *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. The general published his work in 2005, and as soon as I read it, in early 2006, I recognised what he was saying as a description of much of what we were wrestling with.

Domestic tasks

There is one further dimension to the way the ADF has been used in recent years that deserves comment. This concerns the increased requirement for elements of the force to do more within Australia, through being tasked to provide a wider range of services on behalf of the Government.

In part, this has arisen from the threat of terrorism. In Australia's case, some of it has been in relation to hosting particular and significant international events such as the Olympic Games in 2000, the Commonwealth Games in 2006 and APEC in 2007, all of which involved ADF assistance to civil policing. To provide for military assets being used more readily in the event of a major terrorist incident, some amendment of the laws governing such call-out provisions, including for reserve forces, were necessary. I understand that other governments, including Singapore, have taken similar action. This of course adds a further dimension to the complexity of the business for which our military forces must be prepared.

Beyond the area of counter-terrorism, Defence assets in Australia have also been used increasingly in recent years on operations in support of civilian agencies in countering people smuggling and the growing volume of illegal fishing in Australian waters. These are roles which in some other countries are undertaken by coast-guards, but Australian governments have so far taken the view that our maritime assets are too small to split between blue water duties and border protection, and anyway that a versatile force should be able to do both. At any one time these days, we have some 400 ADF personnel deployed on these border protection operations.

At home, the ADF has historically been called upon to help in times of natural disasters, such as floods and bush fires. A further dimension to such assistance emerged when the ADF was directed to provide logistic support and medical staff to the emergency intervention in health and social issues affecting indigenous communities across northern Australia. Similarly, the defence forces of many regional countries have been involved in planning, supporting and in some cases co-ordinating the response to an outbreak of avian flu or other pandemic.

This kind of domestic activity reflects the basic reality that, as a general rule in any country, the defence force will be the biggest, best resourced, most accessible work force available to the government. It is in addition a work force many of whose members are on stand-by at any one time, so it is not a matter of pulling them off one job to do another, as it is for instance with most of our police forces.

Humanitarian operations

The role of military forces in response to humanitarian and natural disasters demands particular attention, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Military forces are frequently called upon in response to disasters to provide medical, logistic and engineering capabilities. No other agencies of government offer all of these capabilities or the scale or skills required to mount big operations.

This was demonstrated very fully across the region in the responses to the tsunami which struck in late 2004 and again in the responses to Pakistan's huge earthquake in 2005. In the countries most directly affected by that tsunami – Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India – military forces were of course called out, but many other governments in the region also sent force elements.

The response of the Singapore Defence Force to the effects of the tsunami in Aceh in northern Sumatra, was especially impressive, reflecting not only Singapore's proximity to the disaster but also its capabilities (especially its Chinook helicopters), the efficiency of its forces and – above all - the will of its Government. From Australia's point of view, we were pleased to be able to put our resources at the disposal of the Indonesian general who was in charge in Sumatra – another first - and to work with Singapore's forces and later with other nations when they arrived.

We cannot be certain whether there will be armed conflicts in this region in the future, but we can be certain that there will be natural disasters. Regrettably, the tectonic structures of South East Asian and the Pacific rim ensure this. We must hope that the Krakatoa eruption is not repeated: Anuk Krakatoa is growing rapidly, and the effects of an explosion today like that in 1883 would be so much greater than it was even then.

Whether or not we will face this catastrophe is unknown, but lesser events are certain, and so too is the likelihood that military forces will be called upon. We do not know where or when, but regional defence forces should certainly be prepared. For the Australian and New Zealand Defence Forces, being alert to prospective disasters in the South Pacific is part of their lives and, whatever the state of our political relationships with the island states, if a calamity occurs they always look to us.

While natural disasters of this kind have always been with us, the world today faces two new or increased risks. The first, if the pundits are correct, is the risk of what are being called 'extreme weather events' – typhoons, floods and so on. We have seen some of them already, and in cases like those in New Orleans, in Innisfail in northern Australia in 2006, and in response to the recent floods in the United Kingdom, military forces were called upon. Indeed, in the UK case, the Royal Air Force has described its involvement in the flood relief as its biggest-ever peacetime operation.

The second is the risk of pandemics. Again, in many cases our military forces are already involved in response planning and, if there is an outbreak of one or other of the threatened epidemics, much will be expected of them.

The use of military forces in these circumstances is good from more points of view than just that of disaster relief. It demonstrates to tax-payers that their money is being used well even if it is not being used to prosecute wars. When international efforts are involved, the co-operation that results enhances understanding and indeed interoperability between regional defence forces. Successful operations in other countries are good for reputations and relationships.

Adapting to change

In regard to the tempo and nature of defence force deployments, both internationally and domestically, the

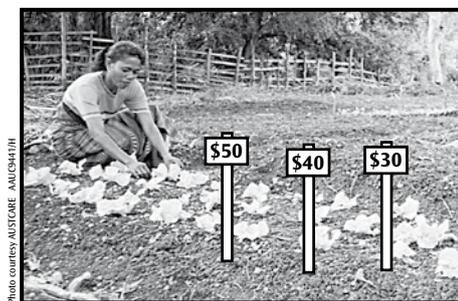
Australian experience is being reflected in at least some other regional countries. The reality is that the role of regional military forces is shifting away from the traditional and exclusive tasks of defeating and deterring military threats to national sovereignty, towards their use in support of more subtle and complex policy and government service agendas both abroad and at home.

For the present, in Australia's case at least, no one is seriously suggesting that we should move away from equipping our force and preparing it primarily for its traditional or conventional roles. While we can all hope, no one who takes these matters seriously is prepared to say that the current hiatus in industrial, state-on-state conflict in the Asia-Pacific region will last forever.

But there is a view that we can and should start do a bit more to move the doctrines, training and preparation of our military forces beyond these primary or core duties. We need to do a little more to prepare our personnel more purposefully for what so many of them actually do, not just in the realm of modern, irregular warfare and peacekeeping, but also in the new forms of stabilisation, civil support, humanitarian and other non-combat operations which are so much part of the reality of military life today. ♦

Ric Smith, AO, PSM, was Secretary of the Department of Defence 2002-06, Australian Ambassador to China 1996-2000, and Ambassador to Indonesia, 2001-2002. This article is an edited – and slightly updated – version of an address he made to the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers in Singapore in 2007.

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