Australia's New Main Battle Tanks

The Australian Army is in the process of acquiring a new main battle tank (MBT). This acquisition is contrary to the policy announced in the 2000 defence white paper when the Government said it had decided against the development of heavy armoured forces suitable for contributions to coalition forces in high intensity conflicts.

So why buy tanks now when military interventions like those in East Timor, Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands have seen only one Special Forces soldier killed? Why buy new tanks when there are calls for budget surpluses to be spent on education or health? This Research Note seeks to determine what factors have prompted the need for Australia to replace its current tank fleet. Analysed are some of the strengths and questions arising from the decision to buy new MBTs.

The Argument for Tanks

Advanced MBTs allow military forces better chances of winning in battle and possession of them substantially improves crew protection. Alan Dupont—a highly respected strategic commentator—has been advised by defence that new tanks will increase the chance of mission success by 30 per cent and reduce Australian casualties by a factor of six. Whilst around a dozen US and UK MBTs have been damaged in Iraq by mines and anti-armour weapons, less than a handful of tank crew have died. This degree of protection is highly appealing in any conflict, not just for the combat troops, but for decision makers who have to send troops into combat whilst worrying about the impact of casualties.

Australia acquired 103 Leopard AS1 MBT variants in 1977. The Australian Leopard AS1 MBT is a vehicle from an era when heavy armour was sacrificed for speed. The choice of the Leopard AS1 made sense in continental defence scenarios which foresaw the Army defending Australia from enemies unlikely to land MBT themselves. Unfortunately, in its current state, the Leopard AS1 is vulnerable to mines and hand-held anti-armoured weapons and its frame is not suited to being upgraded.

Most areas where the Australian Army is likely to deploy—either in war or on peacekeeping missions—are located in regions dominated by what the military refer to as 'complex terrain'. Broadly, this includes areas that are either heavily urbanised, or have a mix of heavy scrub or jungle, sometimes mountains or swamp, often in proximity to urban areas. Much of the fighting in Iraq was in proximity to urban terrain. When guerrillas fight among the civilian population, modern military operations become more complex. Friendly forces must obviously take the greatest care to avoid civilian casualties and unwarranted destruction whilst still managing to win the battle and keep the peace.

Tanks form an integral part of any combined arms team, the loss of any one element of which exposes the rest. Without tanks, the infantry are exposed, and without ground elements, helicopters are extremely limited during the close-quarter battle. The protection offered by modern MBTs is extended to the infantry and other dismounted soldiers carrying out operations, not just the tank crew. The presence of tanks provides a significant boost to the effectiveness and security of other force elements, even during peacekeeping operations.

Questions for Consideration

Are tanks the right weapons? Canada has decided to dispose of its Leopard tank fleet and replace its tanks with US developed 18-tonne Stryker armoured gun systems armed with 105mm guns. The Stryker is a wheeled armoured vehicle, very similar in appearance to the Australian Light Armoured Vehicle (ASLAV). Australia has several hundred ASLAVs, but none armed with 105mm guns. Would a more sensible acquisition be 105mm gun-armed ASLAVs rather than tanks? The purchase would be around $200 million cheaper, though these vehicles are not as well protected as an MBT.

Are there enough tanks already? In its 2003 campaign in Iraq the US Army used only 25 per cent of its available MBT inventory to conquer the country. Furthermore, whilst the 3rd Mechanised Division, 3rd Armoured Cavalry Regiment and three Marine battalions had MBTs (around 10 battalions), the remaining 42 battalions of...
The British Army needed 15 transport ships to move as formations. Conventional divisions needed to be moved as formations. For example, the 46th Division fought in formations for the first time at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

The British Army needed 15 transport ships to move as formations. Conventional divisions needed to be moved as formations for the first time at the Battle of Arras in 1917. The British Army needed 15 transport ships to move as formations. Conventional divisions needed to be moved as formations for the first time at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

**Will we use these new tanks?**

Australia has not used tanks in East Timor, Afghanistan or the Solomon Islands. They were, however, crucial to operations once introduced in Vietnam in 1968. So are new MBT needed now? If Australia is going to supply armoured units for coalition operations overseas, then these tanks also need infantry—most commonly mechanised infantry—to accompany them. Australia's current mechanised infantry vehicles do not have comparable mobility or protection to these tanks. Force numbers may also be a problem. A rule of thumb is that for each tank unit, two mechanised infantry units are needed. Australia has one mechanised infantry unit—at less than full strength. Does Australia need a second mechanised battalion, how will it be raised, how much will it cost, and will Australia use that battalion if the cost is paid?

**Can these tanks be moved?**

Armies fight in formations—for example brigades—and they need to be moved as formations. The British Army needed 15 ships to get its 7th Armoured Brigade to war in Iraq in 2003. The Government has indicated that Australia is acquiring new amphibious ships, but they will arrive after 2010. The question could be asked why buy tanks in 2004? The Australian Navy currently has three old amphibious ships, but they would have significant problems putting tanks ashore, for example, in the South West Pacific. Contracting civilian transport ships may not be possible in a crisis now that global merchant fleets have shrunk and become much more specialised. None of the transport aircraft of the RAAF can lift a Leopard AS1, so there is no hope of moving new MBTs with the air force.

**International reaction?**

Acquiring advanced MBTs could send mixed messages to countries in our near neighbourhood. Although Malaysia is acquiring equivalent T80 MBTs, within the region questions may still arise as to why the Australian Army is acquiring a heavy armoured capability at a time when the government has just stated that 'the threat of direct military attack on Australia is less than it was in 2000'.

**What is the threat?**

Domestically, even given of the threat of terrorism, questions could be asked about the rationale for a shift away from an Army that is light infantry in nature (troops operating from helicopters, on foot or from lightly armoured air transportable vehicles) suitable for rapid deployment. In the public mind the threat is a terrorist with a car-bomb, not someone driving another MBT. Would more police officers be better for countering terrorists? Internally the Australian Army has always identified a need to retain heavier capabilities, but the public has not always heard the message.

**Logistic support?**

A purchase price of $600 million has been floated for the new MBT. However, does this price include operating costs and logistic support arrangements for the new tanks? Will they use more fuel, are their component parts more expensive, are these costs reflected in the acquisition price and so on?

**Conclusion**

New advanced MBTs of the kind currently proposed could offer Australian troops more protection in certain combat situations. They would also make Australian troops more capable in some conflict scenario against an identifiable enemy. Apart from the costs (financial and political) it is arguable that Australia already has light forces suitable for coalition operations and interventions to support regional neighbours. It could also be argued that the issue of whether these tanks are appropriate or necessary in the Australian strategic environment is, therefore, a matter requiring further public assessment.