

## 2004 UK Defence cuts: possible Australian implications

### Summary

In mid July 2004 the UK Ministry of Defence published [Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities](#). The document outlines cuts of up to 25 per cent in existing UK combat systems and 20 per cent in UK personnel numbers within four years. The UK believes precision targeting has lowered the need for as many people and platforms, operations further afield require lighter forces, and changed perceptions of threat have altered the missions of defence forces.

Most significant in the UK report is the observation that:

The full spectrum of military capabilities is not required for large scale operations, as the most demanding operations could only conceivably be undertaken alongside the US.<sup>1</sup>

Some believe the cuts may not eventuate.<sup>2</sup> However, following the UK example, it could be argued a similar review is warranted for Australia's ten year \$50 billion Defence Capability Plan, the plan that guides procurement, as well as personnel functions which in the 2004–05 Budget exceed \$5 billion.<sup>3</sup>

It could be further argued that, like the UK, the most demanding operations for Australia could conceivably only be undertaken alongside the US. This raises a number of questions for Australian policy makers regarding the appropriateness of the current force structure of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) versus our need to operate independently in a broad range of contingencies.

### Changes in UK defence

Amongst many changes, the UK plans to reduce its naval forces from 31 frigates to 25 and its nuclear attack submarines from 11 to 8. The Army will shrink from 40 infantry battalions to 36 and give up six heavy artillery and several tank sub-units. The Royal Air Force (RAF) will dispense with four ground based air defence units, close one airbase, lower its maritime air surveillance fleet from 21 to 16 aircraft, and the number of RAF offensive aircrews will decline from 210 to 170. In all some 27 000 uniformed and 10 000 defence civilian positions will be trimmed.<sup>4</sup> Savings from changes to force structure will assist modernisation.

### Justification for UK change

UK Minister of Defence Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons that the UK needed to:

shift away from an emphasis on numbers of platforms and people ... to a new emphasis on effects and outcomes and ... new technologies<sup>5</sup>

To support this policy the UK Ministry of Defence developed a force structure package based on the need to sustain up to three concurrent operations of a small and/or medium scale. The UK assumes that the most complex large scale operations will only be conducted as part of a US-led coalition, which is a surprising policy position given the large scale and unitary nature of the Falklands War in 1982.<sup>6</sup>

The UK describes a small operation as being similar to their 400 strong border surveillance battle group and 12 person military mission that supported Macedonia in 2001.<sup>7</sup> A

comparable Australian operation was the six month deployment of the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion group and trainers in East Timor in early 2004.

For a medium-sized operation the UK foresees the need for a force similar to that used in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002. It is estimated that around 3500–4000 UK defence personnel were deployed at various locations in south and central Asia at the height of operations in Afghanistan. The naval component was based on an aircraft carrier and amphibious warship with escorts, the land force around a Marine Commando battalion group, all supported by RAF sub-units.<sup>8</sup> A comparable Australian medium scale operation was the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Special Forces and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) contribution that assisted coalition efforts in Iraq in 2003.

For a large-scale operation the UK anticipates a need for a mixed combined arms force of around three brigades, air and naval forces, numbering some 20 000 personnel, similar to that deployed to Iraq in 2003.<sup>9</sup> Australia has not mounted an operation of comparable magnitude since World War II, though nearly 10 000 ADF personnel did participate in operations in East Timor in the late 1990s. For the East Timor deployment Australia sent a reinforced brigade of around 4000 troops and no tank units, though light armour was deployed. No RAAF air combat assets were used, though air transport played a significant role. Only the RAN called upon most of its fleet to undertake the operation.<sup>10</sup>

## Australian implications

In July 2004 Prime Minister Howard said that:

For the foreseeable future, the major threats to Australia are more likely to come from terrorists and international criminals than from conventional military attack.<sup>11</sup>

The [2004 Fulbright Symposium](#), a US–Australia annual conference, argued that terrorism is essentially a security not a defence problem. This does not suggest that conventional military forces do not have a role to play against terrorists. That role, however, may be a supporting one, providing capabilities only when a response is beyond existing non-defence resources. Some 2004 Fulbright speakers emphasised the message that the core business of defence remains responding to and defeating armed attack by other nations against Australia.<sup>12</sup>

A UK–style review may indicate similar low priority activities in the ADF. Three insights of potential reviewable functions are:

- The role of indirect fire support in the Army.
- The function of surveillance, submarine attack and surface strike delivered by RAAF P3-C aircraft.
- The function of maritime patrol delivered by RAN patrol boats.

Despite deploying peace enforcement/combat-like forces in Somalia, Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, Australia has not fired a round of artillery or ground based air defence ammunition in anger since the end of the Vietnam War in 1972. However, since that time all artillery systems have been replaced, and a decision to replace them again for \$750 million is due to be made in 2005–06.<sup>13</sup> It could be argued that given the assessed future threat, the upgrading of the F/A-18 fighter force with precision guided weapons, the introduction of Tiger attack and reconnaissance helicopters and the past history of

artillery deployments, artillery-like functions in the permanent forces of the Army should be examined.

Australia currently has a force of 22 RAAF P3-C surveillance/strike /Anti-submarine warfare aircraft.<sup>14</sup> It costs over \$500 million annually to support these aircraft.<sup>15</sup> The RAAF believes that by 2015 it will need around eight P3-C–like aircraft and some unmanned aerial vehicles to undertake current P3-C roles.<sup>16</sup> With the impending introduction of airborne early warning and control aircraft into the RAAF, the existing regional submarine capability and upgrades to the precision strike capability of RAAF F/A -18 fighters, reducing P3 -C aircraft numbers in the RAAF sooner than 2015 may be warranted.

The RAN patrol boat fleet is about to be replaced with 12 vessels costing \$550 million. It currently costs \$288 million a year to sustain an RAN patrol boat capability.<sup>17</sup> Customs maintains a fleet of eight inshore patrol vessels for around \$50 million.<sup>18</sup> The RAN vessels are built to operate in tougher ocean conditions and have larger crews than their Customs equivalent. However, the RAN patrol boats are not warfighting platforms, in that they have no defence against air attack and little capability against major surface combatants.

Arguably, interdiction operations by ship and aircraft directed at illegal immigrants are more a security operation than a war fighting function. Perhaps it is time to review which department should sustain this function and at what cost. The need for Australia to have deployable, sustainable yet effective military forces is not in question.<sup>19</sup> However, whilst Australia’s strategic circumstances differ to those of the UK, in the 2004 Australian defence budget \$884 million in funding for capital equipment was deferred to beyond 2007–08.<sup>20</sup> Similar issues partly motivated the UK review. Perhaps ADF functions and structures can

be further modified. Arguably this may release cash for investment in higher priority defence capabilities, whilst ensuring the on-going defence and security of Australia.

1. UK Ministry of Defence, [Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities](#), UK defence website, p. 2.
2. [STRATFOR online](#), 26 July 2004
3. Defence Portfolio Budget Statement 2004–05, AGPS, p. 102.
4. *Future Capabilities*, op. cit., pp. 5–10.
5. A. Chuter, ‘UK Chops Forces’, [Defense News online](#), 26 July 2004.
6. *Future Capabilities*, op. cit., p. 3.
7. *Future Capabilities*, op. cit., p. 2. See also the UK [Ministry of Defence website](#).
8. [UK Ministry of Defence website](#).
9. *Future Capabilities*, op. cit., p. 2.
10. See Australian defence press releases from the period at [www.defence.gov.au](#)
11. Speech by J. Howard MP on national security, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 18 June 2004.
12. See A. Borgu, [Combating Terrorism](#), online at [www.polsis.uq.edu.au](#)
13. *Defence Capability Plan 2004–14*, [Department of Defence](#) online, p. 123.
14. *2003–04 Military Balance*, IISS, p. 150.
15. *Defence Portfolio Budget Statement 2004–05*, AGPS, p. 178 and 2003–04 p. 99.
16. AM A. Houston, interviewed in *Asian Defence Journal*, July/August ed 2004, p. 25.
17. *Defence Portfolio Budget Statement 2004–05*, AGPS, p. 136.
18. *Attorney-General’s Portfolio Budget Statement 2004–05*, AGPS, p. 113.
19. Senator The Hon R. Hill, [Press Release 142/03](#).
20. G. Barker, *Australian Financial Review*, 1 July 2004.

### Peter Rixon Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Section Information and Research Services

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