

FDI Feature Interview

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The New Zealand Army Today: 'A More Responsive, Smarter and Adaptable Army'

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Key Points

- 70 per cent of the New Zealand Army currently has overseas operational experience.
- Wellington is looking to refocus defence policy back towards the South Pacific as it prepares to draw down from Afghanistan.
- Strategic competition and state fragility pose significant security challenges in the South Pacific.
- The New Zealand Army has worked closely with the United States Army in Afghanistan, while the Wellington Declaration is bringing new opportunities for to train with US forces.
- The New Zealand and Australian Armies continue to enjoy a high degree of interoperability.

Summary

As a result of ongoing regional and extra-regional operational deployments, the New Zealand Army has transformed into a land force capable of operating in diverse environments and situations. In this context, **Major General Tim Keating**, who commands the New Zealand Army, talked to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the Army's response to ongoing high tempo deployments overseas, the growing importance of coalition interoperability and training, efforts towards modernisation and the Army's future intentions.

Commentary

Future Directions International:

Q: How has the Army managed the challenges posed by the post-9/11 order of persistent overseas deployments?

Major General Keating: The Army's modern story starts in 1999 where we deployed six consecutive battalions to East Timor. Before that, the Army used to heavily focus on individual and collective training, which was not too dissimilar to other armies. With a decade plus of persistent operations we could not maintain the tempo of operations and also keep up our individual and collective training. Therefore, more traditional combined arms training has been sacrificed by us. Our army's strength is derived from the excellent individual training systems we have had in place for a number of years. In the last decade the challenge for us has been is maintaining the integrity of the individual training system. However, as we draw down from some of these operations we will begin to re-emphasise collective training.

The post 9/11 environment has significantly shaped the way we operate. We have deployed persistently to East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Afghanistan and have many other soldiers deployed on peacekeeping missions in Africa and the Middle East. The Army has continued to maintain its strength at around 5,000 personnel. As a small force our army had to rapidly adapt to deploy on multiple operations across numerous theatres. Currently, about 70 per cent of our army have overseas operational experience. Trying to retain the middle rank of soldiers consisting of the Sergeants, Staff Sergeants, Captains and the Majors, has been my biggest challenge. They are highly sought after by other elements of the public and commercial sectors. We need them to be our Army's future leaders as they have a wealth of operational experience, far more than my generation.

Over the last decade our military operations have been different to what we have trained for, that is, conventional operations. Our traditional garrison structures were not always suited to the requirements of complex missions. What we had was a specific war fighting force with fixed battalion and logistics regiment structures. But that was how we were not operating and fighting. Our new norm is: 'As we train we fight'. Our forces had to be tailored to be mission specific and adaptive, not only structurally but culturally, as we had to put together different organisations at short notice. The key strength of our army has traditionally been our light infantry. The culture of the soldier has had to change and be adaptive. When I send soldiers out to Afghanistan, we arm them with the core war fighting skills, but they also have to be good at handing out seeds, shaking hands, smiling and walking into a school and handing out books. They have to understand cultural nuances much more. In essence, we have had to develop the soldier into a quasi-diplomat.

Future Directions International:

Q: Can you describe the ongoing training and interoperability programmes with coalition forces?

Major General Keating: We have maintained our ongoing training and exchange programs with the Australian Army. Australian officer cadets are trained in New Zealand and ours are trained in Australia. Every two years we participate in Exercise Hamel, which is a large Australian exercise that has been maintained as a cornerstone of our coalition training. Our close historic relationship with Australia enables us to operate alongside each other very well. We do not have to force interoperability because our army's equipment systems are

compatible and culturally it comes naturally anyway. Both nations are at capacity delivering operation outputs and are comfortable with the level of joint training we are doing together.

Over the last decade, we have operated very closely alongside the US Army in Afghanistan. For instance, our contribution to the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamiyan Province falls under the purview of a US Army brigade. We still have a good individual training programme with the US Army and send our officers to US defence colleges. Due to the 'Wellington Declaration' this relationship is getting better and is opening new opportunities to train alongside US forces.

Future Directions International:

Q: Tell us about the Army's agenda for modernisation and plans for the future?

Major General Keating: From an equipment perspective, the flagship change for the New Zealand Army has been the introduction of the LAV III. It is a potent war fighting platform, which can be up-scaled and downscaled where required. The LAV III has opened up other opportunities or capabilities for us in an operational theatre like Afghanistan, where force protection is a significant issue. However, we have also been able to use it due to its mobility and command and control system for disaster relief operations in places like Christchurch after the earthquake. Into the future, we are on the cusp of our C4ISR upgrade. But we will be taking our time to think carefully about how our C4ISR programme will be a key enabler in developing an Army that has a focus on precision.

Currently, we are just rolling out our 2015 plan to realign ourselves with the lessons that we have taken out of the last ten years. My vision is to develop a more responsive, smarter and adaptable army. Our defence policy is again refocusing on our own region as we look to drawdown from Afghanistan post-2012. There are many challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and we have in the past deployed to Bougainville, East Timor and the Solomon Islands. This region has become a renewed focus for the world as it presents many great opportunities for growth and development. Inherent in this are some significant security challenges posed by competition and the fragility of the region's nations.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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