Effective 'future Anzac force' needs careful consideration
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Courage, mateship, loyalty. Such personal qualities have embodied the Anzac ideal from 1915 but now that heritage looks to be reinvigorated beyond individual deeds, with politicians on both sides of the Tasman keen to enhance closer defence relations calling for development of what might be called a "future Anzac force". However, while legacy and sentiment might run deep, the purpose, employment and shape of such a force needs careful consideration.

Recent statements from prime ministers John Key and Kevin Rudd on ideas for an Anzac rapid response force certainly have precedents, but rarely have they been raised at such levels, and in the absence of a clear threat to common national interests.

Some sense of the possible scope was given in Australia's defence white paper Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 developing an Anzac taskforce that could "deploy seamlessly into our region at short notice" was one possibility envisaged within "opportunities to rebuild our historical capacity to integrate Australian and New Zealand force elements". Key and Rudd revealed on August 20 that respective Defence chiefs have been asked to explore the details.

First expressed through the 1944 Canberra Pact, and later the 1951 ANZUS Alliance, and Closer Defence Relations from 1991, our formal relations embody a shared vision of close allies confident in their ability to operate together. The Australian and New Zealand defence forces annually exchange many personnel and conduct high-level talks. The future security environment, and how best to meet its challenges are regularly and frankly discussed. Equally, ideas for new capabilities are shared.

Even with such cooperation, there are limits to our Anzac interoperability. Not all doctrine, tactics and techniques are "seamless", and while both countries hold forces ready to respond to crises, response options are not always considered in concert between headquarters. There is a deal of compatibility in strategic logistic support and maritime surveillance, but further interoperability would enhance regional security efforts.

Undoubtedly it makes sense to optimise defence resources, but there are political ramifications beyond needing to agree on rules of engagement. An inescapable shared crisis (such as World War I) certainly galvanises governments, but when matters affecting national interests evolve slowly, it's hard to agree unilaterally on a strategy, let alone bilaterally. This emphasises the need for both countries to ensure great clarity about the purpose and utility of the force.

Also, both countries must accept that a future Anzac force may not be able to deploy in every instance. Each country's strategic interests have diverged in recent history, such as New Zealand's deployment to Bosnia and Australia's to Iraq. Respective force rotation and preparedness regimes would need to accommodate unilateral interests. Moreover, each country's strategic outlook can be very different at times. Force 2030 foresaw a future considering worst-case scenarios, as evidenced by the planned purchase of 100 Joint Strike Fighters and 12 submarines.

This contrasts with New Zealand Defence Minister Wayne Mapp's comment that " we don't envisage shooting down enemy aircraft or sinking submarines". While raising an actual, bilaterally manned Anzac unit might make a politically potent statement, it would appear more practical to establish an enduring rotational commitment model similar to Europe's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps. Though in some ways more complicated, this would allow broader exposure to trans-Tasman interoperability, and establish more personal-level linkages.

Given the greater suitability of a rotational model, army elements would most likely predominate in any future Anzac force. This is not to say that the other services are not needed, but naval and air force elements can achieve necessary levels of interoperability in other ways. The same cannot be said for land forces, which demand far greater intimacy at all levels. More importantly, a visibly two-nation land force poses a starker message of common resolve.

Like any ready group, a future Anzac force would need to be agile, and readily configured for multiple styles of mission and degree of threat. First, this means certain levels of force protection and mobility. Second, the force would need vital offensive support and information collection assets capable of strategic feeds equally to the two countries. Third, the force would need to be big enough to operate on its own and make a difference, but not so large as to eviscerate its parent services. Fourth, it would need to be well- equipped with transport and logistic support.

Finally, a "seamless" future Anzac force would need to be integrated with field elements of all the other government agencies required to deliver a comprehensive response to a security challenge. This would mean Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand's Ministry of of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID, NZAID, federal police agents and others, but it also reinforces the rationale for the type of command and coordination needed. Such a force would be bereft without a form of multilateral and multi-agency command and coordination arrangement typified by the special coordinator role set up for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in 2003.

A future Anzac force holds many practical trans-Tasman advantages, but its viability depends on both governments realistically considering the bounds of its employment, and ensuring it's designed to support common national interests.

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