

## **Back to the future of keeping peace in the neighbourhood**

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The Sydney Morning Herald

28 August 2006

P. 11

John Howard loves the army, and it shows. When he became Prime Minister the army had four infantry battalions. It got two more in 1999, and now Howard is giving it another two over the next few years. But in the process he has done much more than restore the battalions the army lost in the years after Vietnam: he has also restored a clear sense of the army's mission, after 30 years of confusion and uncertainty.

Howard has transformed the army into an instrument of his policy of engagement in Australia's neighbourhood. Last week's announcements that the army will grow by two light infantry battalions, and that the Australian Federal Police's overseas deployment group will also grow significantly, consolidate a process he began years ago.

As they responded to neighbourhood crises in the late 1990s, culminating in the deployment of Interfet to East Timor in 1999, Howard and his colleagues redefined the role of the army. They moved away from the idea of a force designed primarily to counter small raids on Australian territory and instead focused on building a force to operate independently in the region, to help stabilise our small, weak neighbours.

This new approach was enshrined in the 2000 defence white paper, which said the army's main task was to operate in our neighbourhood, and set demanding benchmarks for what they should be able to do there.

But before the army could properly absorb this clear new direction, September 11, 2001, intervened. Many in the army, supported by the then defence minister, Robert Hill, saw the attacks in the United States as changing everything, and they began to argue that helping the US in the Middle East was now the army's main task for coming decades. To prepare for more operations like the invasion of Iraq, the army focused on building heavier forces, and buying the Abrams tanks.

That was wrong in two ways. First, it assumed there would be more invasions like Iraq. Second, it missed the fact that despite September 11, Australia still faced security issues closer to home in places such as the Solomons, East Timor and Papua New Guinea. For them we needed not bigger tanks, but more troops.

This misreading of Australia's priorities after September 11 deepened the confusion about the army's real job, a confusion that extends to the 1970s and 1980s when Australia abandoned the army's forward defence role and focused on the defence of the continent. But with the navy and air force guarding our maritime approaches, there seemed little serious left for the army to do, which it resented.

For a while, supporting the US in the war on terrorism looked like a way for the army to get back to forward defence, but this never made strategic sense. Australia has important interests in the Middle East, and we will need to keep forces there for a long time. But our biggest responsibilities - the ones we have no choice about, and the ones we must take the lead in - are in our own backyard.

Howard, though willing to indulge his favourite service on things such as tanks, has always understood the priority that policy must give to our backyard. The crises in the Solomon Islands and East Timor will have reminded him how big our local commitments and liabilities are. In this, as in so many things, his instincts align with the electorate. It would not be a surprise if the Government's private polling shows voter concern the army is overstretched, and that we need more troops to deal with issues on our doorstep. That would have helped drive last week's decisions.

Now, with those decisions, the Government has affirmed the direction of the 2000 white paper, and given the army a clear, strategically coherent, publicly supportable role. Its main job is to undertake independent operations designed to uphold our interest in the stability of our neighbourhood. That is a huge step forward.

But it is not the end of the problems. The army expects challenges building the new battalions, because it has given itself four years to raise the first one. It cannot blame demographics. With 2 million young men between the ages of 18 and 25, the army only needs to find another 2600. Better recruiting is needed, but so are much deeper reforms to the way the armed forces manages and treats its people. The Government will have to push hard on this.

Money might also be a problem. There is a real risk we won't be able to afford all the things the Government has signed up to over the past few years. Sadly, the army will be in the front line for any cuts, because it is easier to cut army numbers than to break contracts for ships or aircraft - or tanks.

Lastly, we need to remember that neither the army nor the police are answers to our neighbours' problems. Regular regional security crises are symptoms of deeper problems - political, institutional, economic and social - and we need to find ways to address these problems while we build our forces to help deal with their symptoms. That remains a real challenge for Howard.

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