

Hugh White
Filling the gap in the front line
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Peter Cosgrove is the best known Australian military officer in generations. You may need to go back to World War II and Thomas Blamey to find an Australian general who was as well known as Cosgrove, and back to World War I and John Monash to find one who enjoyed the same public esteem.

The news that Cosgrove will retire this year raises deep questions about the nature of the job of chief of defence force, and who is to follow him. Actually no one will quite replace Cosgrove, because his tenure has been defined by his unique levels of public recognition and popular regard. But they are, in a sense, separate from his time as chief. He brought them with him to the job, and he will take them with him when he goes.

Nonetheless the office will not emerge unchanged from his tenure. His successor will find it not only more public than it was, but also more national, with demands and expectations that go beyond managing and commanding the Defence Force. This is because Cosgrove's public profile has been part cause, part effect, of a wider phenomenon – the elevation of the Defence Force, and especially the army, to a more central place as one of the key institutions of our national life.

The army has always been an important part of Australia's self-image, but John Howard has taken advantage of East Timor and the war on terrorism to make it one of the icons of his politically potent redefinition of Australian society and identity. The Cosgrove phenomenon has been a key part.

None of this detracts from Cosgrove's own qualities and achievements. East Timor made him a national figure because he did an outstanding job there. To those who work with him, his qualities are exactly those the public saw and admired when he was in East Timor – a direct manner, genuine courtesy, ready grasp of fundamentals, quick decisions and an ability to say what he means simply and directly.

But East Timor is a long time ago. Cosgrove's time as chief will be remembered primarily for the role the Defence Force played in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. But for him that was probably not much of a challenge. In such coalition operations the chief does little beyond advising the Government what kinds of forces they could send. The big strategic decisions are made in Washington, the Government here decides whether we will join in, and the conduct of the operations is managed in the theatre.

Other smaller operations like the Solomon Islands commitment and – most recently – tsunami relief have kept the military busy, but I'm sure Cosgrove would be the first to acknowledge that as chief he has not faced the kind of strategic-level command challenges his predecessor, Admiral Chris Barrie, faced in 1999. Barrie had to advise the Government about initiating and mounting the intervention in East Timor and commanding the operation at the strategic level.

So despite the tempo of operations, most of Cosgrove's time has been taken up running the Defence Organisation – a responsibility he shares with his civilian

counterpart, the Secretary of Defence. The past few years have been difficult. Most publicity has been on the Auditor-General's concerns about Defence's accounts, but the more serious problems relate to the big decisions about equipment and capabilities.

On these issues there has been a shift in the balance of power away from the central Australian Defence Headquarters to the individual services – army, navy and air force. Cosgrove's own promotion from chief of army to chief of defence force started the trend. He did not come up through the headquarters – in fact he was the first officer to become chief without having run headquarters as the vice-chief of the Defence Force since that position was created in the '80s. His natural instinct has been to look to the service chiefs for advice and ideas. This was easy because the ADF today has three very capable chiefs of service. The heads of the navy, army and air force all have clear potential to serve as chief. They have formed a strong support team for Cosgrove. But each has his own agenda – or rather the agenda of his service. As power has flowed back to the chiefs, there has been a reversion to the bad old days, with the single services pushing their own barrows and running their own campaigns for their pet projects.

As a result we have lost strategically coherent, financially realistic planning for our defence forces. What we have seen instead is a series of ad hoc and ill-judged decisions to buy "new" tanks built for the Cold War, amphibious ships the size of aircraft carriers, expensive destroyers with capabilities beyond our needs, and even, one hears, Harrier-style jump-jet versions of the Joint Strike Fighter.

Does this matter? Very much. The long-term planning for Australia's defence capabilities has collapsed, and there is even talk that Defence would like to stop producing the Defence Capability Plan because it has ceased to correspond to reality. This poses real strategic risks – that money will be wasted on the wrong capabilities, while we will not invest in important new systems that are critical to our future security, and that the whole process will be submerged in delay and muddle.

Of course, the choice of future defence capabilities are difficult decisions. There is no simple "professional military" answer to the best force structure for Australia. But the chief of the Defence Force has a critical role to play in leading the process, and taking responsibility, with the secretary, for the quality of the advice they provide to ministers. Howard and his colleagues will want to ponder this when they choose Cosgrove's successor.

They need to balance the new, post-Cosgrove, national role of the chief with the demands of the job itself. They need a chief who has a vision for the ADF, not just ambition for his own service.

They need someone with sufficient depth of strategic expertise to understand the issues and make up his own mind on them. And they need a chief with the authority over his colleagues to make his views stick within the organisation.

Tough job.

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