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Dr Carlo Kopp

Situating the appreciation – The perils of force structure planning by edict

Australia is on the verge of a strategic decline in regional military standing unseen for many decades. The creeping arms race which has gripped Asia, a byproduct of budgetary surpluses and an open global arms market, has produced a regional spending spree on state of the art combat aircraft, guided weapons, surface combatants, submarines and ISR systems not seen since the Warsaw Pact spending surge of the early 1980s. These developments have been paralleled by the Global War on Terror, which has pushed the US into strategic and budgetary “overstretch” and are seriously challenging its long term ability to credibly intervene in the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia’s response to these developments has been remarkable – downsizing and deskilling of the Air Force’s core capabilities of the order of fifty percent, coupled with heavy investments in a number of ostensibly “joint” land and maritime capabilities.

Yet the rhetoric emanating from the Canberra bureaucracy, and the offices of the past two Defence ministers, presents a glowing picture of an ADF which is surging ahead in the acquisition of an ADF force structure that will be second to none in this region.

Such a glaring dichotomy between observable strategic reality and nation state propaganda is disturbing for a variety of good reasons.

The first is that the apparatus of state is clearly disconnected from the situational picture across the region. The second is that excluding a surprise strategic calamity which exposes this dichotomy, no effort will be made to correct this disconnect from reality. The third is that sooner or later such an unexpected calamity will occur, to the detriment of the Australian people. The fourth is that taxpayer’s funds are being squandered, Defence Industry decimated while work is shifted overseas, and de-skilling in Defence and Industry continues, unabated.

How has this come about? The immediate answer is that force structure planning decisions since 2001 have been dominated by arbitrary choices rather than by analytically derived selections. Decisions have been made on trivialised, often internal political criteria, rather than through carefully considered analyses anchored in hard numbers and a proper understanding of the interaction between technology and strategy.

When challenged with hard numbers, the Canberra bureaucracy and political apparatus has reacted with defensive explanations that usually beggar belief. Forensic analysis of public statements and parliamentary evidence put forth by the offices of the past two Ministers, as well as many senior

Defence officials, shows a disturbing frequency of factual errors, logical fallacies, and misunderstandings of the basics of contemporary force structure planning technique, and its supporting knowledge base.

This exposes two of the deeper causes behind the ongoing series of poor planning choices. Firstly repeated cycles of downsizing, outsourcing and resulting deskilling have critically depleted the organic analytical, technological, strategic, planning and acquisitions skills base within the Services and the wider Defence organisation. Secondly, the increasing prominence of propaganda in the management of the organisation has elevated nonsense into the position of defacto doctrine, displacing classical military reasoning processes.

The prima facie replacement since 2001 of the formal force structure planning process with its analytical underpinnings, by arbitrary decisions, a posteriori dressed up as analytically determined choices, has without doubt put Australia firmly on the road to strategic ruin.

A retired general officer commented to me in 2004 that we are seeing a “guess and backfill approach to planning – situating the appreciation”. Three years later we can map an unbroken series of such major decisions: the JSF in 2002, the premature retirement of the F-111 fleet in 2003, and the Super Hornet in 2007, the latter in the face of uniform public opposition by Australia’s analytical community. The strategic damage produced by these decisions, if not reversed and corrected, will take decades to repair, if it is at all repairable in a strategically relevant timeframe.

Australia needs a fundamental rethink of how it goes about the business of planning for Defence, and must return to the proven and robust methodology of analytically driven planning. The nation cannot afford either fiscally or strategically, to pursue the force structure plan imposed since 2001. It must be revised, and current plans terminated or radically changed, with the focus being a strategically relevant and fiscally affordable strategy. Of the three services, the Air Force has been damaged the most, and its repair must become an urgent national priority, if we are to meet the policy objectives set by government in terms of the capability to achieve air superiority in our region, and to maintain a robust and credibly self-reliant aerospace industrial base.

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