

**CDA Institute Seminar
26 February 2009
Fairmont Chateau Laurier Hotel, Ottawa, Canada**

**Panel II – Asia-Pacific and Canadian Defence and Security
Colonel John Blaxland, Australian Embassy in Thailand
*“Looking west, not east, to Afghanistan”***

It is a great honour for me to be invited to speak to you today. I was delighted to be invited to come because, as some of you may know, I have a strong affinity with Canada. In my book, *Strategic Cousins* published by McGill Queens University Press in 2006, I drew many of the parallels between Canadian and Australian military history and defence and security strategies spanning more than a century. Today, the parallels remain just as strong with our two countries similarly engaged in the conflict in Afghanistan.

In my talk today I hope to explain what Australia is doing militarily in Afghanistan and the wider Middle East and explain why it is important in terms of Australia's geo-strategic context and its international policy priorities. I will then touch on some of the military capabilities that have been revamped in light of these commitments and the conceptual work this has generated in terms of adaptive campaigning to suit the complexity of the operations we face today.

What Australia is doing

In Australia's case, we are not focused solely on Afghanistan. Like Canada, we maintain naval forces in the Gulf and have had a C130 Hercules and a P3 Orion aircraft detachment deployed in the Gulf for several years. But Australia has been on operations constantly, particularly since the deployment of forces into East Timor in 1999 and currently maintains about 3,500 troops on 11 operations worldwide.

As you know, Australia participated in the 2003 Iraq War and committed a battle group to help secure and stabilise southern Iraq from 2005 to 2008 as part of the British-led Multi-National Division South East. In mid 2008 Australia withdrew its overwatch battle group from southern Iraq, leaving a security detachment in Baghdad and a number of integrated embedded officers working alongside their US and British colleagues.

Nowadays Australia's main military focus in the Middle East is on Afghanistan. In particular, it is in Oruzgan province in Regional Command South, with some elements in Kandahar and Helmand provinces as well. Oruzgan is immediately to the north of Kandahar province. Within Oruzgan, Australia operates as a junior partner in the Dutch-led Task Force-Uruzgan. The Netherlands, as the lead nation, continue to provide the key capabilities and enablers that allow cohesive military action in Oruzgan. Additional contributions are maintained in Oruzgan by Czechoslovakia, France, Slovakia and Singapore. Australia continues to enjoy an excellent working relationship with these forces and the local Afghan authorities. Together these nations are providing forces for security, mentoring and reconstruction Australia's contribution to efforts in Afghanistan consists of a number of elements.

First, is the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force, or MRTF. This is essentially a battalion-sized force of about 440 personnel incorporating infantry, engineers and a range of specialist support elements. The force undertakes construction works and provides mentoring

and training for the Afghan National Army battalion based in Oruzgan Province. The MRTF provides a unique arrangement to actively challenge the Taliban's claims of legitimacy and their appeals for the loyalty of the people of Oruzgan. In particular, the MRTF is engaged in construction works, improvement of provincial infrastructure and community-based projects as well as trade training to the local population and providing military engineering training for the Afghan National Army in Oruzgan Province.

Second, is the Special Operations Task Group, or SOTG, based around a highly capable and versatile Special Forces group. The Task Group of up to 330 personnel operates in support of ISAF security operations and provides security and force protection for the MRTF in Oruzgan Province. The SOTG consists of Commandos, members of the Special Air Service Regiment and enabling and support personnel. This has proven to be a highly capable contribution, having severely degraded the Taliban leadership in the province, preventing the training and recruitment of many fighters and degrading their ability to mount improvised explosive device and complex attacks.

Third, is Rotary Wing Group. This Group operates two CH47D Chinook Medium Lift Helicopters from Kandahar Air Field. Australia only has a small fleet of six Chinook helicopters, but can sustain two on rotation from March until October annually. The Chinooks perform combat support, quick response force and medical/casualty evacuation missions.

Fourth, is an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Detachment. A UAV detachment of 30 personnel from Australia's 20th Surveillance Targeting Acquisition Regiment operating the SCANEAGLE UAV.

Fifth, Australia has a detachment of gunners embedded as part of a British Army artillery regiment in Helmand province to the west of Kandahar. Given the equipment and procedural compatibilities between the British and Australian artillery, this is proving to be a particularly effective and sustainable contribution to the overall campaign in Afghanistan.

Sixth, is the Air Force Control and Reporting Centre (CRC). The CRC of up to 75 personnel is operating from Kandahar Airfield. The CRC controls southern Afghan operational airspace. Air space management involves aircraft coordination and de-confliction, in support of Coalition air operations protecting troops on the ground.

Seventh, is the Force Level Logistic Asset in Kandahar which sustains and supplies Australian operations in Afghanistan.

And eight, Australia maintains national command, liaison and embedded personnel elements of approximately 65 Defence Force members with approximately 55 staff officers embedded in various headquarters. These are considered essential in helping to carry the load of responsibility and to ensure to the effective integration of Australia's contribution into the overarching multi-national mission in Afghanistan.

The total number of Australian military personnel committed to operations inside Afghanistan is just under 1100 troops. This makes Australia the largest non-NATO and ninth largest overall troop contributor to the campaign and one of only a few willing to commit troops to combat operations in the southern Pashtun-dominated provinces of Afghanistan.

Australia has made positive progress in disrupting insurgent operations in Oruzgan, including recent successes in targeting key insurgent leaders. Our Mentoring and Liaison Team is helping to build the capacity of the Afghan National Army and we are also enhancing infrastructure and security through the efforts of our Reconstruction Task Force. The resulting improvement in security conditions allows space for development and training activities to continue in Oruzgan reflecting the three key principles (security, development and governance) of NATO's comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan.

Australia recognises that the military is only one phase of a three phased approach that encompasses security, governance and development. So we are not going to set the conditions for withdrawal of military forces by military action alone. As my Chief of Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston said recently, military efforts alone will not be sufficient to secure Afghanistan from Taliban influence. What is required is a coordinated international effort to implement NATO's comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan, which will allow civilian and military efforts to build on the security international forces are helping to establish. Ultimately, progress in security is sustainable only with progress in governance and development.

Why it is important

So why is this contribution important? Well, Australians recognise that the situation in Afghanistan is complicated and requires a multifaceted whole-of-government and internationally-coordinated commitment to rehabilitation and reconstruction. Australia's whole of government approach in Afghanistan aligns with NATO's comprehensive strategy, and Australia has evolved its military contribution to include a greater training commitment through the deployment of an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team in November 2008. The work of the Australian Defence Force, AusAID and the Australian Federal Police in Afghanistan is closely coordinated. Mentoring the local security forces and providing a stable and secure environment for NGOs to become more actively involved in rebuilding the fabric of society in Afghanistan is central to the Australian approach in Afghanistan.

Australia also recognises that an overarching strategy is essential for a successful counter-insurgency campaign and works closely with our ally and partners to effectively implement NATO's comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan. Australia is intimately involved in ongoing strategic, operational and tactical planning in Afghanistan. At the strategic level Australia has been involved in the development and implementation of NATO's comprehensive strategy on Afghanistan. In addition, a small number of Defence personnel also recently participated in a US Central Command-led assessment of activities and operations in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility, incorporating Afghanistan. Australia has embedded ADF personnel within key positions in NATO and Central Command as well as a Defence Attache accredited to NATO. Australia also has embedded ADF personnel within key positions at all levels of command in Afghanistan. This includes appointments within Headquarters ISAF, Regional Command (South) and the Task Force Headquarters in Oruzgan.

The Australian commitment to Afghanistan recognises Australia's firm belief that, while counter-insurgency campaigns can be long and drawn out affairs, they are winnable. And in the case of Afghanistan, they are essential for the future security and stability not just of Afghanistan and its immediate neighbourhood but for closer to home as well.

Australia's geo-strategic place in the Asia-Pacific

Australia's engagement on operations in Afghanistan is best understood in terms of Australia's geo-strategic place in the world and its international policy determinants. For Australians, the two bombings in Bali and the bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, let alone the more recent terrorist incident in Mumbai are clear reminders of the dangers of unchecked militant extremism and the potential for such extremism to spread. Australians recognise that 9/11 and the Bali bombings made clear that we cannot afford to walk away from Afghanistan and leave it for extremists to reclaim as their haven.

But Australia also has other concerns closer to home in its immediate neighbourhood which constrain our ability to surge much more in Afghanistan. Australia maintains forces in both Solomon Islands and Timor Leste. In both cases, the current military footprint is at its lowest ebb in several years, with about 100 Australian soldiers in Solomon Islands and 650 troops in Timor Leste.

But we also know that Australia's region is one where its forces can be called upon at relatively short notice to conduct operations with a substantial impact on the region and particularly on the Australian Defence Force – a force of only about 53,000 regular troops.

In late 1999, for instance, Australia's commitment to what was then East Timor peaked at about 5000 troops.

Similarly, in 2006, while still committed to operations in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, Australia faced an unprecedented surge in operational requirements, deploying forces off the coast of Fiji, deploying troops to Tonga to assist the government there restore order and participating in evacuation operations in Lebanon.

The year before Australia also had been heavily involved in Tsunami recovery operations in Aceh at the western tip of Indonesia as well as in Thailand, where I am based.

The political and economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific region points to the region increasingly becoming more contested militarily. Significant population growth is forecast for the Asia Pacific region in the coming decades and the resulting demographic changes, let alone any effects of climate change, are expected to increase the pressure on food, water and energy resources.

Added to the mix are a number of unresolved border disputes between many countries in Asia including between China and India, the littoral states of the South China Sea, Thailand and Cambodia, Burma and Bangladesh, and so on. In addition, the Taiwan straits remain a potential flashpoint, as does the inter-Korean boundary.

International Policy Pillars

So the Asia-Pacific faces a number of challenges which Australia must watch closely. Australia's geo-strategic position has led to a reliance on three pillars of international policy which I will touch on now. Australia's Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, has made it clear that the alliance with the United States is and will remain the bedrock of Australia's strategic policy.

The alliance has a long history, with military cooperation between Australia and the United States going back even further to the First World War but peaking following the outbreak of war in the Pacific during the Second World War.

The alliance with the United States is the first of three pillars of Australia's international policy.

The second pillar is Australia's comprehensive engagement with Asia and the Pacific. In the last couple of decades, Australia has become a particularly multi-cultural place, in many ways very similar to Canada.

Australia believes that regional stability in the Asia-Pacific region will in large part rely on the continuing strong presence of Australia's closest ally, the United States. We consider the most crucial relationship, in East Asia and globally, will be between the United States and China. We see the relationships between China, the US and Japan as having significant consequences on our security and economy.

With this in mind, Australia has set out to deepen security cooperation with Japan and South Korea (states that are as close to Australia geographically as they are to Canada).

Australia also is eager to strengthen ties in South-east Asia where, because of geographic proximity and the processes of continuing political and economic change, Australia's national security interests will continue to feature prominently.

In the case of Thailand, where I am based, for instance, a well-established series of land, sea and air military exercises have helped strengthen the bonds, increase mutual understanding and build confidence in each others' military capabilities. This has been reinforced by a significant scholarship program with several hundred graduates of Australian military colleges and universities since the program was initiated in the mid 1950s.

For Australia, these efforts paid dividends in September 1999 when, in its hour of crisis, Thailand was the first to commit troops as part of the Australian-led International Force in East Timor known as INTERFET.

The third pillar is Australia's comprehensive engagement with the United Nations and the multilateral order – an approach which closely resembles that taken by Canada.

Revamping military capabilities

These geo-strategic circumstances and international policy pillars have resulted in the range of operational commitments touched on earlier. Capability limitations encountered on these operations in recent years have shown that Australian Defence Force still suffer from shortages in high-tech equipment and in personnel.

In the Australian Army's case, significant efforts have been taken in recent years to ensure that deployed forces are provided with the best equipment available, trained to the highest levels achievable and provided with the best support possible.

As part of these efforts, armed reconnaissance helicopters have been acquired based on the Eurocopter Tiger helicopter design. Australia's Blackhawk helicopters are being replaced by the larger and more versatile MRH 90s.

Hundreds of Australian designed and built 'Bushmaster' IED-resistant armoured vehicles have been purchased, supplementing the Canadian built and widely employed LAVs, and the Bushmasters already have proven their worth saving many lives in road-side bombings. In addition, the standard soldier's suite of personal equipment is now second to none.

Similarly, the Royal Australian Navy is upgrading its guided missile frigates and Anzac Class frigates while acquiring three air warfare destroyers and two highly versatile amphibious craft capable of carrying and deploying a battalion group with supporting helicopters for operations either in remote parts of Australia or further afield – be it for warlike operations or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The Royal Australian Air Force has is purchasing two squadrons of F/A-18 Super Hornets as an interim measure until the Joint Strike Fighter is available, although the ultimate decision on the JSF purchase has yet to be made.

In addition, aerial refuelling and airborne early warning and control aircraft are set to significantly enhance the RAAF's capabilities, endurance and reach.

Conceptual development

These technological changes are being supported by updated conceptual frameworks such as the Australian Army's Adaptive Campaigning concept.

The Adaptive Campaigning concept paper defines the Land Force as part of the military contribution to a Whole of Government approach to resolving conflicts.

Adaptive campaigning comprises five interdependent and mutually reinforcing lines of operation. The five lines of operation indeed can be seen at work in Afghanistan today.

- First, Joint Land Combat. Today, in Afghanistan's Oruzgan province, this is witnessed on a regular basis with Special Forces elements, and the combined arms teams working closely with air elements to decisively engage with the enemy while discriminating between combatants and non-combatants. This is not to say Australians have perfected this highly challenging task, but with superior training and equipment, and with a clear understanding of the significance of winning hearts and minds, Australian soldiers understand the implications of miscalculation. And with precision weapons, backed up with an unprecedented level of high quality tactical intelligence support, commanders can engage targets with a confidence unimagined in previous conflicts.
- Second, Population Support – that is, actions to establish, restore or temporarily replace the necessary essential services in effected communities. This line of operation is recognised as an essential part of not so much wining the battle, but winning the post-battle contest for the legitimacy of our cause and confidence in our prospects in the minds of the people we are operating amongst.
- Third, Indigenous Capacity Building – that is, actions to nurture the establishment of civilian governance. This line of operation recognises that initial success can soon evaporate if indigenous capacity is not there to take over when we leave. Australia's

experience in Timor Leste in 2006, when Australian and other troops returned after having only departed 18 months beforehand, illustrates the dangers of inadequately seeking to nurture indigenous capacity before declaring an operation successfully completed.

- Fourth, Population Protection. In Afghanistan, this is proving to be a much greater task than any of us can address on our own. and
- Fifth, Public Information – that is, actions that inform and shape the perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and understanding of target population groups.

The conceptual work behind Australia's Adaptive Campaigning construct and the five lines of operation recognises the complexity of the modern operating environment, with the increasing lethality of weapons, and the so-called the 'emptying of the battle space', whereby force densities have diminished due to increased lethality and improved communications. It also recognises the retreat of adversaries into complex, often urban, terrain as a consequence of rapidly improving intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capabilities referred to as ISTAR.

The way ahead

The efforts undertaken so far, and the government's commitment to continuing to resource the armed forces, despite the significant financial pressures, demonstrates the Australian Government's commitment to continue to be a significant middle power contributor in Afghanistan and beyond, as a responsible member of the international community that appreciates the potential consequences of inaction.

As Australia and Canada continue to examine their options in Afghanistan, there remains considerable benefit to be gained in cross examining each others circumstances and responses. Not surprisingly, therefore, in recent years Canada and Australia have established a bilateral Defence Policy Forum to enhance the exchange of views and experiences and to explore areas for closer collaboration and cross-pollination.

As two countries with a remarkable range of similarities and enduring commonalities in their strategic interests, Australians see the need to be in there, shoulder to shoulder with our NATO partners in Afghanistan for the long haul, as we have been on so many occasions elsewhere in the past, recognising that involvement in helping to secure and stabilise Afghanistan really is in the interests of all of us.