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TONY GODFREY-SMITH

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# Low Level Conflict Contingencies and Australian Defence Policy

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This monograph examines low-level conflict contingencies in two contexts:

- a the incidence and nature of low-level conflict since 1945 and its relevance to Australia's strategic environment; and
- b the role and perceptions of low-level conflict contingencies in Australian defence policy.

The paper concludes that low-level contingencies are relevant to Australia's strategic environment, but that assessments of these contingencies have tended to focus on the tactics that might be employed at the expense of the possible origins of conflict, the motives and objectives of potential aggressors, and the political context in which such contingencies might arise. Low-level contingencies, however, do not in themselves constitute a threat of sufficient magnitude to provide the focus at present lacking in Australia's defence posture and the role of the Australian defence forces.

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The author's assessments and conclusions are based on public sources and have no official status or endorsement.

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Tony Godfrey-Smith  
February 1985.

**Tony Godfrey-Smith** graduated from The Australian National University with an honours degree in history in 1964. He joined the then Department of External Affairs in 1966 and subsequently served abroad in Ghana, Taiwan and Malaysia. This paper was submitted as a sub-thesis towards the degree of MA (International Relations), which he undertook in the Department of International Relations, Australian National University, during 1983 while on leave of absence from the Department of Foreign Affairs. He is currently Australian High Commissioner to Western Samoa.

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## INTRODUCTION

Low-level conflict contingencies are a relatively recent addition to the Australian defence lexicon. They appeared in various guises in public defence deliberations in the early 1970s in the context of the quest for an alternative defence doctrine to 'forward defence', but their appearance also reflected changes in the public perception of potential threats to Australia's security. The perceived threat of communist or Asian expansionism receded, but for some observers was replaced by potential threats to Australian interests short of invasion or major assault.

The 1976 White Paper on Australian Defence acknowledged the need for a defence force capability to deal with 'selected shorter-term contingencies',<sup>1</sup> but formal recognition of the relevance of low-level contingencies to current defence doctrine was arguably conferred by the scenario for Exercise Kangaroo 83. Kangaroo 83 was a radical departure from its predecessors, which focussed on conventional war capabilities and employed the Australian armed forces in combined operations with their allied counterparts. The declared aim of Kangaroo 83 was

to exercise the Australian Defence Force in joint operations in a low-level conflict in the defence of the north-west of Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Kangaroo 83 broke new ground in terms of the nature, level and location of the exercise hostilities and the extent of joint operations between the Australian services; it also involved civilian authorities and the local civilian population on a scale without precedent in exercises of this nature.

This study examines low-level conflict contingencies in two contexts:

- (a) the incidence and nature of low-level conflict since 1945 and its relevance to Australia's strategic environment; and
- (b) the role and perceptions of low-level conflict contingencies in Australian defence policy.

These themes are examined in the following sequence:

**Part 1: Low-level conflict and Australia's strategic environment.**

Introduction.

A review of representative examples of low-level conflict since 1945.

A re-examination of Australia's strategic environment.

An assessment of the relevance and applicability of low-level conflict contingencies to Australia.

**Part 2: Low-level contingencies and Australian defence policy.**

A brief survey of the evolution of Australian defence policy.

An evaluation of the role of low-level conflict contingencies in Australian defence policy.

In summary, this study concludes that:

- 1 Low-level conflict contingencies are relevant to the assessment of Australia's strategic environment and the consequent formulation of defence policy and capabilities.
- 2 However assessments of low-level contingencies have to date tended to focus on the tactics that might be employed against Australia at the expense of their possible origins, the possible motives and objectives of the potential aggressor, and the political context in which such contingencies might arise.
- 3 In the absence of a specific threat, Australia's defence posture and the role of the Australian defence forces continue to lack definition. Low-level contingencies cannot themselves supply this focus and their invocation in the Australian defence debate does not diminish the need to adjust Australia's defence policy and capabilities to accommodate profound changes in our strategic environment.

**Notes**

- 1 Australian Parliament, Australian Defence (White Paper presented to Parliament by the Minister for Defence, the Hon. D.J. Killen, November 1976), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976, p.13.
- 2 Department of Defence, Exercise Kangaroo 83: VIP Brief, p.1.

**PART 1**  
**LOW-LEVEL CONFLICT AND**  
**AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT**

**LOW-LEVEL CONFLICT SINCE 1945**

**Introduction**

This section examines the nature of low-level conflict (including its relationship to other levels of conflict) and surveys a representative sample of such conflict since 1945. The implications of this analysis for Australian defence policy are examined below in section IV.

Low-level conflict contingencies have also been described as 'lesser-', 'limited-', 'shorter-term-' or 'low intensity' contingencies; as 'contingent circumstances'; and as 'low-level situations'. In the interests of clarity and consistency this study presupposes the existence of a broad spectrum of conflict contingencies ranging from high- to low-level and employs this terminology throughout. A high-level conflict contingency would threaten the survival or integrity of a state, while a low-level contingency would pose threats of lower magnitudes, e.g. threats or hostile actions designed to extract concessions in circumstances in which national survival is not at stake. The utility of distinguishing intermediate or medium-level contingencies between these extremes will be addressed below.

**The nature of low-level conflict**

There appear to be four main areas in which low-level conflict might be distinguished from its higher-level counterpart:

- (i) the scale of the conflict;
- (ii) the character of the conflict;
- (iii) the objectives and strategies adopted by the initiator/aggressor;
- (iv) the objectives and counterstrategies adopted by the reactor/defender.

All the above are subject to considerable variation both individually and in combination.

In its 1981 report Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability, the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence (JCFAD) defined low-level contingencies as

those threats which can be dealt with within the peacetime organisation and structure of the Defence Force.<sup>1</sup>

The JCFAD report listed eleven low-level contingencies that might confront Australia:

- (a) sporadic attacks against key civil facilities and installations (which are sometimes referred to as vital points, as the orderly life of a modern society depends on them), for example, power stations, petroleum refineries, water supply pumping stations and computers;
- (b) attacks against isolated military facilities;
- (c) harassment of our shipping, fishing activities, and offshore exploration and exploitation;
- (d) sporadic intrusions into Australia's air space by military aircraft or smugglers;
- (e) military support for the illegal exploitation of our offshore resources;
- (f) the planned introduction of exotic diseases or the support of illegal migrants or drug-runners;
- (g) harassment of our nationals or a threat to their safety in overseas countries including seizure of overseas property and Australian embassies;
- (h) external support for dissident elements in, or military pressures against, a regional country the security of which is important to Australia;
- (i) covert or overt overseas support for Australian dissident or minority groups in Australia who might be encouraged to resort to terrorist action;
- (j) overseas based terrorist groups using violence or threats of violence in Australia or on an Australian aircraft; and
- (k) large-scale but non-violent intrusions into Australia's proposed Exclusive Economic Zone for the purpose of poaching scarce resources.<sup>2</sup>



The JCFAD report also distinguished between low-level and intermediate-level contingencies, describing the latter as threats with

limited objectives (against Australia) under policy limitations as to the extent of the destructive power that might be employed and the extent of the geographical areas that might be involved.<sup>3</sup>

The JCFAD identified five potential intermediate contingencies and concluded that the defence effort required to respond to most of them 'would be likely to involve a substantial expansion of the Australian Defence Force':

- (a) lodgements on Australian territory that are limited (including in time); the areas that appear to be more vulnerable as targets for limited lodgements would be offshore islands and territories as for example the Cocos Islands, or the Torres Strait Islands, or areas of northern and north-western Australia such as Cape York Peninsula, Arnhem Land, parts of the Kimberley or Pilbara regions and Australian territory in Antarctica;
- (b) major raids: targets for this level of threat are more likely to be military bases; key civil installations and facilities and the joint United States/Australian defence facilities. To be regarded as intermediate level threats, such raids would need to be on a continuing basis, or comprise seize-and-hold operations against major facilities or resource installations;
- (c) external aggression against a regional country, the security of which is highly important to Australia; this would apply particularly to states and territories in the Indonesian/Melanesian archipelago and to New Zealand;
- (d) blockade of an Australian port or ports including by the relatively economical device of laying mines; and
- (e) disruption of our lines of shipping communications, or closure of a strait either in isolation or in the context of Western lines of communications. As Australian trade is

important to other powers and is mostly carried in foreign ships, it is difficult to envisage such a contingency occurring except as part of a more general conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The range of low- and intermediate-level contingencies outlined above is broadly consistent with other public assessments of this nature,<sup>5</sup> and conforms closely to an earlier presentation in a paper by Commodore K.D. Gray.<sup>6</sup>

Is this distinction between low- and intermediate-level contingencies justified? The spectrum of contingencies between high-level and low-level could in principle be subdivided into numerous divisions, but the utility of this exercise is questionable. Such definitions imply an orderly, stepped progression of escalating contingencies which belies their fluid nature. Further, such definitions tend to focus on the military or tactical aspects of the low-level contingencies at the expense of their political origins and manifestations. More importantly, the variables involved are such that most intermediate definitions would in practice break down. Low-level 'attacks against isolated military facilities' would not remain such if they occurred frequently or had a wide geographic distribution. Attacks of this nature might in practice prove more disruptive than the JCFAD's intermediate-level contingency of the impact on Australian trade of the closure of a strait.

Should the defence effort required to counter a contingency be the sole or major criterion to distinguish between contingency levels? If so, the level of a contingency could be altered by changes in defence capabilities alone: a given contingency could be intermediate-level pending the acquisition of a new weapons system, after which it could be downgraded to a low-level threat. The effort required to counter a conflict contingency is obviously an important factor in defence planning, but it seems too subjective and too variable to be relied upon as the major criterion for defining contingencies. It tells us little about the possible origins or objectives of the contingency, and again tends to place contingencies in an exclusively military context. It will be argued below that the military dimension is only one of several dimensions in which low-level contingencies generally function. It therefore seems wiser to avoid the problems of definition encountered

in any attempt to define a rigorous scale of conflict contingencies and to work within the two extremes, bearing in mind that the level of threat and consequent demands on defence resources obviously rise in the continuum between the lower and higher levels.

### **Low-level conflict since 1945**

Conflict can be categorised into 'almost endless typologies', but there appears to be a consensus on four basic types: nuclear war, conventional war, minor harassment and insurgency.<sup>7</sup> In principle the latter three - limited conventional war, minor harassment and insurgency - can qualify as low-level conflict. But all four basic types of conflict can coalesce, and the divisions between the latter three in particular can become ambiguous and contentious.<sup>8</sup>

A survey of low-level conflict since 1945 suggests that it can be separated into colonial conflict, interstate conflict, and internal conflict, although even these broad categories pose demarcation problems. A representative sample of low-level conflict since 1945 listed under these categories would include the following:<sup>9</sup>

#### **Colonial conflict**

Indochina 1945-54  
 French Morocco 1952-56  
 Algerian War 1954-62  
 Indonesia 1945-49  
 Kenya 1952-58  
 Cyprus 1952-59  
 West Irian 1962-63

#### **Interstate conflict**

India-Pakistan (Kashmir) 1947-49  
 Korea 1950-53  
 India-China 1954-65  
 Indonesia-Malaysia 1963-65  
 United States-Cuba (Bay of Pigs) 1960-61  
 Argentina-Chile (Beagle Channel) 1978-84  
 China-Taiwan (Quemoy-Matsu Is.) 1954-58  
 Britain-Iceland ('cod wars') 1958-61; 1972-73  
 Argentina-Britain (Falkland/Malvinas Is.) 1982

**Internal conflict**

Greece 1944-49

Malaya 1948-60

Vietnam 1955-75

Cuba 1958-59

Congo 1960-64

Cyprus 1959-74

Some striking asymmetries of both power and perceptions in these conflicts are immediately apparent. Most of the colonial conflicts were perceived as predominantly low-level conflicts by the defending colonial powers, but posited issues of national survival (or creation) for the opposing nationalists. The Korean and Vietnam conflicts were arguably high-level conflicts for the indigenous inhabitants, but not for their respective foreign allies. The governments in Beijing and Taipei would both view their conflict over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu as an extension of their prolonged internal conflict, yet to most external observers it met the criteria of conventional interstate conflict.<sup>10</sup> North Vietnam at least initially perceived its contest with South Vietnam as primarily an internal conflict, but the allies of South Vietnam interpreted it in interstate terms. Significantly none of the internal conflicts listed above was exclusively internal; the degree of foreign interference or intervention varied between cases and over time in individual cases, but it was nevertheless a recurring feature in these conflicts.

What do these examples of low-level conflict reveal about its nature and occurrence? A detailed case-by-case analysis is beyond the scope of this study, but the salient features of low-level conflict can be discerned in an examination of each category within the broad areas distinguished above of the scale and character of the conflict, the objectives and strategies adopted by the initiator/aggressor, and the objectives and counterstrategies adopted by or imposed upon the reactor/defender.

- o **Colonial conflict**

Colonial conflict may at first sight seem of marginal relevance to contemporary Australia, but it warrants examination for two reasons. First, colonial conflict has been

a prominent arena of low-level conflict since 1945 and consequently merits scrutiny in any comprehensive study of the phenomenon. Secondly it will be argued that although it is inconceivable that Australia would again aspire to become a colonial power, the history of colonial conflict contains some potentially valuable experience which could be applied in Australian defence strategy.

The scale of the colonial conflicts sampled varied considerably, but overall there was a recurring asymmetry of power between the opposing sides. As noted above, the level of conflict was generally perceived as relatively high within the disputed area but as relatively low from the perspective of the colonial power. The notable exception was West Irian, where Indonesia employed an effective combination of belligerent diplomacy and low-level use of force to assert its claims against the Dutch commitment to self-determination for their West New Guinea subjects.<sup>11</sup>

The scale of these conflicts can be partly discerned in force and casualty statistics. At the upper end of the scale, the casualties in the French forces during the Algerian conflict comprised 17,456 dead and almost 65,000 wounded. (The French forces included more than 100,000 Muslims.) European civilian casualties from some 42,000 acts of terrorism amounted to about 10,000, of whom 3,200 were killed or never accounted for. The French estimate that they killed 141,000 members of the opposing Front de la Liberation Nationale (FLN), that another 12,000 died in internal fighting, that the FLN killed 16,000 Muslim civilians, and that another 50,000 Muslim civilians could never be traced. Estimates of the total numbers of Muslim Algerians killed during the conflict vary between from 300,000 to one million.<sup>12</sup>

Towards the other end of the scale, the civilian casualties of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya amounted to 1,826 Africans, 32 Europeans and 26 Asians killed, with 918 Africans, 26 Europeans and 36 Asians wounded. Mau Mau casualties comprised 10,527 killed and 2,633 captured. It is recorded that 2,714 Mau Mau terrorists surrendered and that 26,625 were arrested; some 50,000 Mau Mau supporters were detained during



the emergency. Security force casualties amounted to 534 Africans, 63 Europeans and 3 Asians killed, with 465 Africans, 102 Europeans and 12 Asians wounded.<sup>13</sup>

The character of these colonial conflicts was in essence that of a nationalist struggle against an alien ruling power, and also reflected the asymmetry of power between the adversaries. The defending colonial forces were generally much better armed, equipped and trained, and usually possessed a marked advantage in overall numbers of combat troops. Their nationalist opponents compensated for their disadvantages by resorting to guerilla tactics, intimidation and subversion and by exploiting their contacts and support within the indigenous population. By selective employment of acts of terrorism against key personnel and facilities and avoiding armed clashes with superior colonial forces, relatively small numbers of nationalists were able to impose an enormous security burden on the colonial authorities. The nationalists' tactics were designed to apply pressures on the colonial authorities which would isolate them from their indigenous supporters and ultimately prove intolerable to their home electorate.

These tactics met with considerable success against the colonial rule of war-weary, European liberal democracies, although it seems likely that considerably greater sacrifice would have been necessary to prevail against less liberal regimes. The tactics employed by the colonial powers against the nationalist challenge were essentially defensive and reactive. Opportunities for taking the initiative were limited and generally involved operations designed to penetrate the opposing nationalist organisations and identify and neutralise their leaders, armed units and supporters. These tactics frequently involved authoritarian and in some cases draconian measures, which were usually counter-productive insofar as they alienated support within the indigenous population and thereby strengthened the nationalist cause.

The colonial conflicts were intensely political, embracing domestic and - with the notable exception of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya - international elements.<sup>14</sup> The colonial powers and their nationalist opponents contested the 'hearts and minds' of the

indigenous population, and this contest generally extended to the international political arena. The nationalists sought support in sympathetic countries and in international councils, and often manipulated their supporters and the media effectively in the colonial heartlands to take their case direct to their opponents' domestic political constituency. In general the colonial powers were on the defensive in the political contest as much as in the physical conflict, defending the status quo and reacting to their opponents' initiatives as the struggle developed.

The immediate objective of the anti-colonial nationalists was to displace the colonial power. Post-colonial objectives varied between independence (Indochina, Morocco, Algeria and Indonesia), union with another country (Cyprus), and completion of decolonisation (West Irian). The strategies employed to achieve these objectives were broadly consistent: to challenge the authority of the colonial power through political action; to mount selective physical attacks on individuals and facilities associated with the colonial government; to solicit or demand the support of the local population against the colonial power; to solicit international recognition and support to strengthen the pressures on the colonial power; and to cultivate support and/or defeatism within the colonial power. The political dimension of the struggle was a crucial element in each case since none of the anti-colonial movements could reasonably expect to prevail by force of arms alone.

The basic objective of the colonial powers was to protect their position and interests in the colonies concerned. Their strategies varied considerably in time and place, but were again essentially reactive and defensive. The political dimension of the conflict and of the defensive strategies adopted by the colonial powers was readily apparent in both the domestic political debate and in international campaigns seeking understanding of or support for colonial policy.

- o **Interstate conflict**

The scale of interstate conflict appears wider and more varied than in the colonial conflicts. At one extreme the Korean War produced between three and four million casualties in a conflict that from the Korean perspective

amounted to a full-scale conventional war waged throughout the peninsula. The casualties included approximately 30,000 United States servicemen and 3,143 other United Nations servicemen killed, with 107,000 United States servicemen and 15,700 other United Nations servicemen wounded or missing. Over 400,000 South Korean servicemen were killed, and a somewhat higher number were reported wounded or missing. South Korean civilian casualties are believed to have been about the same magnitude. North Korean casualties have been estimated at around 520,000, while Chinese casualties are thought to have amounted to about 900,000.<sup>15</sup> It seems highly unlikely that a conflict of this magnitude on United States or Australian territory would be styled 'low-level', but the appellation appears to reflect an absence of strategic exchanges between the great powers involved as much as great power chauvinism or subjectivity.

The British-Icelandic 'cod wars' of 1958-61 and 1972-73 lie towards the opposite end of the interstate conflict scale. There appear to have been no serious casualties in the physical encounters between British trawlers, Icelandic gunboats and Royal Navy frigates, which included ramming, net-cutting and on at least one occasion the impact of an Icelandic shell on a British trawler.<sup>16</sup>

The character of these conflicts and the tactics employed by the protagonists were as variable as their colonial counterparts. The Korean conflict amounted to a localised conventional war, and this pattern was repeated on a smaller scale in India's border conflicts with Pakistan and China, China's confrontation with Taiwan over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu and Britain's campaign against Argentina in the Falkland/Malvinas Islands.

Indonesia employed infiltration and insurgency against Malaysia during its Confrontation campaign, which was largely confined to small-scale raids designed to incite rebellion or communal conflict. The raids never amounted to a significant security threat and casualties on both sides were light, but insurgent tactics again necessitated an expensive and disproportionate level of response by the defending forces. In Cuba the rebellion

against the government of Fidel Castro forecast by the CIA and by Cuban emigres did not materialise and the insurgents were defeated ignominiously by Cuban security forces.

The conflict between Argentina and Chile over disputed claims to three small and uninhabited islands in the Beagle Channel was an incipient one, which in 1978 (as in 1899 and 1902) appeared to bring the two countries to the brink of war. The Vatican played an important part in mediating the dispute.<sup>17</sup>

The opponents' objectives in this sampling of interstate conflict were rather more varied and complex than in the colonial conflicts reviewed above. It is generally rather more difficult to identify the initiator/aggressor: most of the interstate conflicts have a complex history and the identification of the initiator often reflects political, legal or moral judgements. The origins of the conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir lie in centuries of Hindu-Muslim conflict in the region, the trauma of Partition, and Pakistan's sympathies for a predominantly Muslim neighbouring state under Hindu rule. Both Pakistan and India moved regular troops into Kashmir when communal strife broke out in 1947, and the 1949 ceasefire line which subsequently conceded approximately 5,000 square miles of western Kashmir to Pakistan (and left India with the remaining 81,000 square miles) became a de facto international frontier.<sup>18</sup> Pakistan's claims are arguably buttressed by India's continuing refusal to allow an act of self-determination to be held in Kashmir. Both parties blame the other for the conflict, and in such circumstances it remains a difficult and probably futile exercise to try to identify a single initiator/aggressor.

India's border conflicts with China have similar antecedents, arising from nineteenth and early twentieth century border demarcations at the initiative of the British Raj. China claimed that it never accepted British demarcation in the disputed areas, while India stood firm on its inherited British-drawn frontiers. China expressed a willingness to negotiate on the basis of the status quo, but from 1954 border incidents occurred as both sides began to assert their presence in the disputed territory. The border incidents were

not made public and relations appeared calm until in 1959 Indian public opinion and comment in support of an unsuccessful revolt in Tibet led to a marked deterioration in relations. Prime Minister Nehru disclosed the history of Chinese border 'intrusions' and Indian public opinion against China hardened. India adopted an aggressive forward patrol policy in the disputed areas apparently on the assumption that China would back down because of Soviet Union and Western support for India. China initially responded cautiously, but Indian policy became progressively more assertive in response to domestic and international pressures. In October 1962 Chinese forces took the initiative and in a brief campaign asserted their control in the disputed border areas of primary concern to China.<sup>19</sup>

Britain's conflict with Argentina over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands also had its origins in a territorial dispute, in this case dating from 1765 when Commodore John Byron took possession of the islands in the name of King George III.<sup>20</sup> In 1982 Argentina invaded the islands, but this decision owed much to misperceptions of and miscalculations about British intentions. Britain contributed significantly to these misperceptions, and domestic political considerations and pressures in both countries played a significant role in the evolution of this conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The primary objective in the interstate conflicts between India and Pakistan, India and China, Britain and Argentina was the acquisition or retention of disputed territory. Domestic and international political factors affected the evolution of each conflict, but they were principally territorial disputes. However in the Korean War and the conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia and the United States and Cuba, the objectives were primarily political. The Korean War arose from rival claims of sovereignty after the Soviet Union blocked United Nations proposals for elections throughout Korea to establish a unified state, but rapidly acquired a Cold War character as the allies of the opposing states intervened in support of their respective proteges. Indonesia's campaign of 'Confrontation' against the creation of Malaysia arose from opposition to what was perceived as an artificial neo-colonialist

entity, but domestic political factors influenced its course.<sup>22</sup> The United States sponsored the Bay of Pigs landings by Cuban dissidents in the hope and expectation that they would precipitate a widespread rebellion that would depose a hostile neighbouring government.

As noted above, the confrontation between China and Taiwan over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu was in essence a continuation of the Chinese civil war. Its immediate origins can be traced to aggressive raids on the mainland launched by the Nationalists from these inshore islands although, as in the Korean War, the conflict quickly acquired Cold War dimensions.

The objectives of Chile and Argentina in their dispute over the Beagle Channel islands were ostensibly territorial, but political and other objectives were also evident. When conflict seemed imminent in 1978 both countries were ruled by military governments, and it has been suggested that an international cause celebre of this nature had attractions as a buttress to their domestic authority. However the central issue appears to have been that Chile's possession of the islands offered prospects of access to rich fishing grounds and potential offshore oil fields through a territorial sea projection from the mouth of the Beagle Channel. Argentina contested Chile's claims as a violation of their 1881 agreement on their spheres of influence, and also sought to end Chilean control of both approaches to its most southerly naval base at Ushuaia. The contest for these islands may also have been perceived by both parties as an initial trial of strength affecting their competing claims in Antarctica. The dispute was resolved by negotiated treaty on 29 November 1984, although ratification is still in process in February 1985.<sup>23</sup>

Britain's 'cod wars' with Iceland arose from competing objectives and claims concerning sovereignty, on this occasion sovereignty over maritime resources rather than territory. Once again the historical antecedents of the conflict had important implications for both parties. British vessels had fished Icelandic fishing grounds since 1400 AD, and conflict occurred following Iceland's unilateral extension of its fishing zone to twelve miles in 1958 and to fifty miles in 1972.

(Iceland claimed a 200 mile fishing zone in 1975 and a revised fishing agreement with Britain was concluded in 1976.) British fishermen claimed long-established rights to the fishing grounds closed unilaterally by Iceland, while Iceland justified the extension of its fishing zone on the contention that overfishing by foreign fleets threatened its most vital natural resource. These opposing objectives regarding sovereignty over maritime resources begat other objectives and responses, including domestic political objectives in Britain and Iceland, strains upon NATO and EEC unity, and changes in Iceland's relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> The 'cod wars' arose from a dispute over access to resources, but their economic origins reached to the fifteenth century and their political environment embraced domestic politics in the countries directly concerned, alliance politics within NATO and relations between the Soviet Union and a strategic member of the NATO alliance.

o **Internal conflict**

Perceptions of the sample of internal conflicts listed above tend to reflect at least some measure of ideological orientation. The internal conflicts in Greece (1944-49), Malaya (1948-60), Vietnam (1955-75) and Cuba (1958-59) were predominantly a drive for power by indigenous communist parties with varying degrees of external support, and can be variously interpreted as manifestations of the Cold War or as indigenous power struggles. The conflict in the Congo (1960-64) was predominantly tribally-based, notwithstanding the radical inclinations and reputation of the murdered Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. The civil conflict in Cyprus was also a tribal conflict, although the term 'communal' is favoured outside the African continent. The defeat of the communist insurgency in Malaya was to a great extent due to its identification with the Chinese community and consequent lack of appeal to the predominantly Malay population.

The scale and nature of these internal conflicts varied within and between them, and embraced conflict ranging from political action through insurgency to conventional war. All of them constituted a struggle for

power between opposing groups, and the political elements of the struggle remained important to both sides. All of the protagonists - governments and opponents - sought and received varying degrees of external support and assistance. This ranged from the very limited external support received by the Communist Party of Malaya <sup>25</sup> to the massive external assistance given to both sides in the Vietnam War.

Stripped of the accompanying rhetoric, the primary objective of the opposing groups/tribes/classes was to obtain or retain power within the state concerned. North Vietnam fought to reunite a divided country, and the Katangese secessionists from the Congo sought to create their own state. The Greek and Cuban conflicts appear to be the only ones readily susceptible to Marxist analysis: the Malayan insurgency was communally-based; the Vietnam War constituted a reassertion of (North) Vietnamese hegemony over South Vietnam and Indochina; the Congo and Cyprus conflicts were based on tribal (i.e. religious/cultural) differences.

### A profile of low-level conflict

What does this survey reveal about the nature of low-level conflict apart from a marked resistance to classification?

Perhaps the most striking general attribute of low-level conflict is the variety manifested in the conflicts themselves and in perceptions of these conflicts. The asymmetries of power that often occur in low-level conflicts seem dwarfed by the recurring asymmetries of perception of the conflict by the protagonists, by their allies and supporters, and within international society at large. These asymmetries of perception are such that any assessment of low-level conflict is immediately vulnerable to criticism or interpretation in ideological or political terms.

The scale of low-level conflict can vary between relatively wide extremes, ranging from localised conventional war to minor harassment. The sample of low-level conflict reviewed above suggests that in general the number of combatants and their missions tend to be limited in area and time, and the overall military effort tends to fall short of full-scale mobilisation for one if not both protagonists. The



scale of low-level conflict seems to be a consequence of two main factors: the relative importance (or lack of importance) of the interests at stake and the relative power of the adversaries. The inhibitions to the escalation of low-level conflict warrant closer examination than this study can afford, but the reasons why low-level conflicts tend to remain thus need to be addressed. In brief, the main restraints appear to be that the protagonists with the will or incentive to escalate the conflict lack the power to do so (e.g. nationalists fighting a colonial power), while those possessing the power to escalate the conflict lack the will or incentive, usually because the interests at stake do not warrant the effort or the risks involved in escalation. The political dimension thus seems an important inhibiting factor in low-level conflict: if the conflicts surveyed above had been confined to straightforward military contests, their nature and course could arguably have been very different.

The character and tactics of low-level conflict are as variable as the scale of the conflict. Nevertheless a recurring feature of the character of these conflicts is their intensely political nature. If 'war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means',<sup>26</sup> then the mixture which produces low-level conflict has a proportionately stronger concentration of politics than 'other means'. The political nature of low-level conflict in part reflects the frequent asymmetries between the adversaries' capabilities and power: in most cases the initiator/aggressor is either unwilling or unable to rely on 'other means' alone. But the political character of low-level conflict is also shaped by the fact that the protagonists are usually motivated by strong political aspirations or objectives; low-level conflict can often be interpreted as a relatively straightforward contest for power or resources, but its origins, evolution and internal dynamics are almost invariably complex and composed of diverse political elements.

Another recurring feature of low-level conflicts is their relatively confined geographical focus. The internal conflicts reviewed above were almost entirely confined to the country concerned, although other (usually neighbouring) countries in some cases provided support or sanctuary for the initiator/aggressor group. The colonial conflicts were largely confined to the colonies concerned. The interstate conflicts sampled were also limited in their geographical

extent, usually being confined to the area that constituted the focus of the dispute. The interstate conflicts generally involved neighbouring states, half of which were contiguous neighbours. The notable exception to this pattern was the conflict between Argentina and Britain over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands.

The objectives and strategies adopted by the initiator/aggressor and the reactor/defender were also very variable, the only common element being their mutual opposition. In the colonial and internal conflicts sampled the objectives of the initiator/aggressor were mainly political and the conflict strategies employed were fashioned to serve political ends. Interstate conflicts were generally more complex. Some had primarily political objectives (Korea, Indonesia-Malaysia, and United States-Cuba) while others focussed on territorial or resources disputes (India-Pakistan, India-China, Argentina-Chile, China-Taiwan, Britain-Iceland, and Argentina-Britain). The territorial/resources disputes were notable for their historical antecedents, which all incorporated strong political elements. With the exception of the more recent China-Taiwan conflict, all these disputes had origins in the nineteenth or earlier centuries.

Economic and resources considerations surfaced in many of the above conflicts, but these issues were only prominent in the Britain-Iceland and Argentina-Chile disputes. In the latter confrontation these considerations have not eclipsed the political dimension of the dispute.

The influence of leaders and interest groups in the evolution and conduct of low-level conflict is beyond the scope of this study, but their influence in defining objectives, mobilising political support and setting strategy should not be underestimated. It is difficult to imagine the course of Indonesia's confrontation of Malaysia without President Sukarno, for example. Sukarno's influence at this period may have been the result of a confluence of factors outside his control, but he exercised it in an idiosyncratic manner which placed his personal imprint indelibly upon the policy and which ironically facilitated its dismantling once the political architect was removed from power.

## Conclusion

The relevance of this experience of low-level conflict to contemporary Australia will be considered in detail in section IV below, but in brief the historical record suggests that probable prerequisites could include substantial and relatively longstanding political differences with a colonial possession, neighbouring state or between opposing internal groups, and/or a dispute with another state over territory or resources. These potential sources of conflict would interact within a complex balance of interests or asymmetry of power which would inhibit the escalation of low-level conflict to higher levels.

The historical record of low-level conflict since 1945 is illuminating but several qualifications should be entered. History does not necessarily repeat itself, and the already variable nature of low-level conflict may change in response to changed political aspirations or ideologies and to changes in technology. Further, Australia's political and strategic situation is in some respects unique: it should not be assumed that the lessons of history learned in other regions necessarily apply to Australia.

## Notes

- 1 Australian Parliament, Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability (Report by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p.48.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p.43.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 For example, Andrew Farran, 'Lower-Level Contingencies and Force Structures', Chapter 13 in Robert O'Neill and D.M. Horner (eds), Australian Defence Policy for the 1980s, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1982, p.203; B.N. Primrose, 'Insurance, Deterrence, Faith: the Search for an Integrated Concept of Defence', The Australian Journal of Defence Studies, Vol.1, No.1, March 1977, p.42; Ray Sunder-

- land, 'Australia's Next War?' Australian National University Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Working Paper No.34, June 1981, pp.9-15.
- 6 K.D. Gray, 'Some Defence Concepts for Australia', Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia, Vol.3, No.2, November 1980.
- 7 Robert O'Neill, 'Present and Future Patterns of Conflict: Some Thoughts on the 1980s', The Australian Journal of Defence Studies, Vol.1, No.1, March 1977, p.17.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 The Middle East has endured chronic low-level conflict since 1945, but the origins of the conflict and its relationship with periodic bouts of high-level conflict compromise its value as a case study of low-level conflict from an Australian perspective. Similarly, the unique origins and evolution of the Northern Ireland conflict seem to render it a special (albeit interesting) case.
- 10 For example, it is listed as a conventional interstate conflict in Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Amelia C. Leiss, et.al., The Control of Local Conflict: A Design Study on Arms Control and Limited War in the Developing Areas. Prepared for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1967, Vol.1, p.8.
- 11 J.A.C. Mackie, Konfrontasi: The Indonesia-Malaysia Dispute 1963-1966, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, pp.98-103.
- 12 Michael Carver, War Since 1945, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980, p.147.
- 13 Ibid., p.43.
- 14 It seems probable that the Mau Mau insurgency would have obtained significant international support from newly-independent nations had it occurred a decade later. It also seems probable that in these circumstances its tactics and objectives would have been adjusted to exploit such support.
- 15 Carver, War Since 1945, p.169.
- 16 Bruce Mitchell, 'Politics, Fish and International Resource Management: the British-Icelandic Cod War', The Geographical Review, Vol.66, No.2, April 1976.

- 17 Peter Calvert, 'Boundary Disputes in Latin America', Conflict Studies, No.146, 1983, pp.9-12.
- 18 Carver, War Since 1945, p.209.
- 19 Ibid., pp.211-222; Bloomfield, et.al., The Control of Local Conflict, p.372.
- 20 J.C.J. Metford, 'Falklands or Malvinas? The Background to the Dispute', International Affairs, Vol.44, No.3, July 1968, p.467.
- 21 See Richard Ned Lebow, 'Miscalculation in the South Atlantic: The Origins of the Falkland War', The Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol.6, No.1, March 1983.
- 22 Mackie, Konfrontasi, pp.122-132, 239-247, 325-333.
- 23 Calvert, 'Boundary Dispute in Latin America'; D.W. Greig, 'The Beagle Channel Arbitration', The Australian Year Book of International Law, Vol.7, 1981, pp.383-384 and Keesing's Contemporary Archives, Record of World Events, Vol.XXX, No.4, April 1984, p.32781.
- 24 Mitchell, 'Politics, Fish and International Resource Management', pp.131-135.
- 25 Bloomfield, et.al., The Control of Local Conflict, Vol.III, p.130.
- 26 C. von Clausewitz, On War, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976, p.402.

## AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

This section offers a brief exposition of Australia's strategic environment and attempts to highlight aspects that the preceding analysis suggests might be vulnerable to low-level conflict contingencies. The evolution of Australian defence perceptions and policy and the influence of this legacy on contemporary perceptions and policy is explored in Part 2 of this monograph.

### A profile of Australia

Australia is an island continent situated between latitudes 10 and 44 degrees south and longitudes 113 and 154 degrees east. It has an area of 7.68 million square kilometres and a coastline of 36,735 kilometres. Australia claims a 200 nautical mile fishing zone which places a similar area under Australian jurisdiction and overlaps comparable claims by its northern and north-eastern neighbours.

Australia's nearest neighbours are Indonesia and Papua New Guinea; Timor is 455 kilometres north-west of Cape Bougainville and the coast of Papua is 155 kilometres north of Cape York. Australia claims a number of offshore and island territories, the latter including Heard and McDonald Islands, Christmas Island, Cocos Island and Norfolk Island. Australia claims sovereignty over its Antarctic Territory which could also in principle form the basis of related maritime claims.

Australia's climate reflects its size and location. Thirty-nine per cent<sup>1</sup> of Australia lies within the tropical zone, but 29.6 per cent has a median annual rainfall of less than 200 millimetres. A further 22.9 per cent of Australian territory lies in the 200 to 300 millimetre median rainfall range, placing a total of 52.5 per cent of Australia within a median rainfall range of 300 millimetres or less.

Australia's population in 1982 was 15 million. In 1980 the combined population of New South Wales and Victoria amounted to 9.0 million of the then population of 14.6 million, and the populations of the state capitals and adjacent urban districts with populations above 100,000 together amounted to 10.2 million. This constituted 69.7 per cent of the then total population.

Australia has a mixed economy with a productive rural sector and substantial mineral resources. In 1980-81 foodstuffs, metalliferous ores and mineral fuels together amounted to \$11,925 million of Australia's total merchandise exports of \$18,941 million. Imports under the same categories amounted to \$3,418 million, of which \$2,726 million were in the mineral fuels category. The industrial sector is under pressure from cheaper imports and is somewhat precariously based on a small domestic market and relatively high wage costs: in 1980-81, for example, Australia's exports of machinery and transport equipment valued at \$1,078 million were swamped by imports in the same category of \$7,033 million. The most productive areas of the rural sector are concentrated in the eastern and south-eastern arcs of the continent, but substantial mineral and mineral fuel resources are located in remote areas along the western and north-western arcs.

Australia's strategic environment thus contains some notable vulnerabilities in terms of low-level conflict (e.g. population size, density and distribution, dispersed resources, dependence on imported technology) which are offset by some countervailing assets (e.g. relatively long sea approaches, no contiguous neighbours, relative self-sufficiency in foodstuffs and some other key resources). The arid environment of most of the continent contributes significantly to the strategic isolation of Australia's productive eastern and southern regions. It probably also ensures that the military effort required to threaten or harass these Australian 'heartlands' would in practice constitute more than low-level conflict - at least from the Australian perspective.

### **Australia's alliances**

- o **The ANZUS Treaty**

The 1976 Parliamentary White Paper on Australian Defence observed that the 1951 ANZUS Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States was our 'one significant alliance', with the proviso that 'it is

prudent to remind ourselves that the US has many diverse interests and obligations'.<sup>2</sup> The key elements of the ANZUS Treaty are set out in Articles III and IV:

#### **Article III**

The Parties will consult together whenever in the opinion of any of them the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened in the Pacific.

#### **Article IV**

Each Party recognises that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.<sup>3</sup>

The 'Nixon Doctrine' announced by President Nixon in Guam in July 1969 and elaborated in a message to Congress in February 1970 decreed that the allies and partners of the United States must accept primary responsibility for their own defence, although the United States undertook to provide a nuclear shield for those allies or other nations whose independence was considered vital to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The exposition of the 'Nixon Doctrine' amplified rather than qualified the ANZUS Treaty. The only unambiguous obligation imposed on the ANZUS partners is to consult, and the 'Nixon Doctrine' merely confirmed that any subsequent action by the United States in support of a treaty partner would depend on the prevailing situation and its implications for United States interests. This position is both rational and reasonable given the 'many diverse interests and obligations' of a superpower, and it would be naive to expect less qualified assurances or more explicit guarantees. The ANZUS Treaty could in principle have been invoked by Australia or New Zealand to counter low-level conflict contingencies prior to the exposition of the 'Nixon Doctrine', but its genesis and orientation were even then based on higher-level contingencies.<sup>5</sup>

The ANZUS Treaty remains a key element in Australian defence strategy, but its nature and provisions make it unlikely either that the relationship itself



might involve Australia in low-level conflict in the foreseeable future, or that it would deliver direct United States intervention should Australia be drawn into a low-level conflict. Nevertheless the treaty could act as a deterrent and inhibit an aggressor from escalating a campaign of low-level conflict against Australia to higher magnitudes of conflict. It also provides the basis for a close defence relationship which in most circumstances would ensure that Australia received a high priority in the delivery of United States defence materiel and logistical and other support to counter any externally directed campaign of low-level conflict.

- o **The Manila Treaty**

The South-east Asia Collective Defence Treaty signed in Manila in 1954 was framed in comparable terms. It also imposes an obligation to consult in the event of any perceived threat and avoids specifying what if any action a treaty partner might take beyond that it act 'in accordance with its constitutional processes'.<sup>6</sup>

The Manila Treaty sought to contain perceived security threats from China and Indochina. The original treaty partners comprised Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States. The South East Asia Treaty Organisation was formed on the basis of the Manila Treaty, but its members never achieved the level of unity or commitment of its North Atlantic counterpart. France had progressively reduced its participation in SEATO, especially military representation, to minimal levels by May 1965. Britain commenced its withdrawal 'east of Suez' in 1968; the 'Nixon Doctrine' was first enunciated in 1969. Pakistan formally withdrew in 1973. In 1975 the remaining treaty partners resolved to 'phase out' the organisation because of changed conditions in the region. The Manila Treaty is thus moribund, and it is difficult to conceive of circumstances in which it might be invoked by Australia or in which its invocation by others might produce substantial military assistance from Australia.

- **The Five Power Defence Arrangements**

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) concluded in 1971 cover defence cooperation between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The arrangements are not a formal treaty but a Ministerial declaration and an exchange of documents to implement it. The arrangements were concluded in response to Britain's military withdrawal from Asia, and they provide a useful (but not essential) framework for delivering defence assistance to Malaysia and Singapore. However the only unambiguous obligation undertaken by the participants is again that of consultation: in the event of an external attack or threat of such attack on Malaysia or Singapore

[the parties] would immediately consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in relation to such attack or threat.<sup>7</sup>

The FPDA were designed to enhance the security of Malaysia and Singapore and to assist them develop their own defence capabilities. It is all but inconceivable that Australia would invoke these arrangements in the defence of its own interests, although it seems quite probable that Malaysia and Singapore would seek Australian assistance under the terms of the FPDA in the event of an external attack or threat of external attack of any magnitude.

- **International disputes**

Australia has no territorial or related disputes with other states. The delimitation of some maritime and seabed boundaries with Indonesia, the Solomon Islands and New Zealand is still subject to negotiation. A number of overlapping claims with Indonesia require resolution, but the negotiation of maritime boundaries with the Solomon Islands and New Zealand seems unlikely to raise difficulties. The prospects that issues of this nature could develop into sources of conflict are reviewed below.

## The global strategic environment

Australia is isolated from the principal areas of global tension and conflict, and in particular lies well clear of the likely primary nuclear target areas of the superpowers. Opinions vary about the immediate and long-term effects of a nuclear exchange in the northern hemisphere; the effects on southern latitudes of a nuclear war largely confined to the northern hemisphere are even more speculative. However assuming a northern hemisphere nuclear exchange does not disrupt the equatorial trough of low pressure which separates most of the atmospheric circulation between the hemispheres, the effects of this catastrophe could be diluted significantly in southern latitudes. One possible post-World War III scenario could therefore be that it might not rend the economic, social and political fabric of Australia and its neighbours on a scale comparable to the devastation of many if not most northern hemisphere states, and that the South East Asian and South Pacific survivors would have to adjust inter alia to a new regional strategic environment without effective external allies. The strategic implications for tropical and southern latitudes of a global nuclear war largely confined to the northern hemisphere have tended to be neglected by strategists and nuclear scenario-writers who have understandably tended to focus on its impact on its northern hemisphere protagonists.

But even if Australia were spared the worst effects of a northern hemisphere nuclear exchange, it contains three United States installations which are probable nuclear targets. These installations - North West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar - make significant contributions to the command, control, communications, navigation and intelligence capabilities of the United States strategic arsenal, and hence to its nuclear war-fighting capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Soviet targeting doctrine accords a relatively high priority to these capabilities, and it can be assumed that they are targeted. However the relative accuracy of Soviet strategic weapons and the remoteness of the installations from major population centres suggest that collateral casualties and damage could be minimised by relatively economical civil defence measures. Australia hosts no other fixed potential strategic targets of this magnitude, although mobile elements of the United States strategic forces would also

appear on Soviet target lists and would therefore pose a potential threat to their environs while in Australian territory during a general nuclear war.

The concentration of Australia's population and industrial capacity in coastal agglomerations renders them vulnerable to strategic nuclear attack and to conventional attack from a variety of platforms (e.g. stand-off guided weapons launched from ships, submarines or long-range bombers). However none of these centres seem to possess significant strategic importance to warrant a nuclear targeting priority, and the only plausible scenario for a sustained conventional attack would be as a prelude to invasion. There is a broad consensus that at present only the superpowers have the capability to mount a credible invasion threat, which would involve the commitment of a substantial proportion of their forces.<sup>9</sup> It is generally taken for granted that the United States does not pose an invasion threat, and that it would not stand idle if its superpower rival contemplated an invasion of Australia. But given the Soviet Union's existing commitments and strategic priorities, it is in any event difficult to conceive the circumstances in which the potential gains might warrant the immense risks and effort that would be required to establish a Soviet beachhead on Australian territory.

### **The regional strategic environment**

Australia maintains relatively close and amicable relations with its ASEAN and Pacific neighbours and generally shares their regional objectives and perceptions. Australia's relations with Vietnam are more formal and rather less substantial but appear broadly satisfactory to both.

Annexure A presents a statistical profile of Australia's regional strategic environment. The population and economic growth rates are particularly striking. The present combined population of the ASEAN countries is 270 million: medium variant projections estimate that this figure will reach 368 million in the year 2000 and 458 million in 2020. The Indochina countries at present have a population of some 67 million. In the year 2000 their projected population will be 95 million and will increase to 122 million in 2020. The ASEAN countries sustained average GNP growth rates

of between 7 and 18 per cent during the 1970s, and the present contribution of industry to their GNP is already significant, ranging from 20 to 41 per cent of GNP. The current combined strength of the ASEAN armed forces is 759,200, compared with 1,097,700 men under arms in Indochina. The present strength of Vietnam's armed forces is 1,029,000.

The expected increase in regional population will be accompanied by profound changes in the urban-rural balance. In 1980, the urban population of South East Asia (the ASEAN countries, Burma and Indochina) comprised 22.8 per cent of the total population. This proportion is projected to increase to 34.6 per cent in 2000 and to 50.1 per cent in 2020. Indonesia's urban population in 1980 amounted to 20.2 per cent of the total population. In the year 2000 this proportion is projected to increase to 32.3 per cent, and to reach 48.1 per cent in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Australia's regional environment is thus a dynamic one, with high population and economic growth rates generating profound changes in traditional societies. There are many other variables involved, and the implications of these trends for Australia are difficult to forecast. It is noteworthy that in general the region is evolving as a pluralistic collection of states each commanding substantial resources of its own. There are no signs of a single state or centre of power emerging which might seek or achieve a position of dominance within the region. It can also be argued that the population and economic growth rates of Australia's neighbours do not in themselves threaten important Australian interests but rather offer potentially valuable economic opportunities for Australia.<sup>11</sup> The future evolution of Australia's regional environment remains somewhat obscure and contains many variables. It would be naive to assume that its progress will either benefit or bypass Australia's interests, but it should also be acknowledged that at present our regional environment is rather more benign than that of the majority of our allies and friends in the northern hemisphere.

## Notes

- 1 Climatic, population and economic statistics are extracted from Year Book Australia, No.66, 1982, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, Australia, 1982.
- 2 Australian Parliament, Australian Defence (White Paper presented to Parliament by the Minister for Defence, the Hon. D.J. Killen, November 1976), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976, p.2.
- 3 Text in T.B. Millar, Australia in Peace and War, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978, p.453.
- 4 Ibid., p.217.
- 5 Ibid., pp.205-210.
- 6 Text in Millar, ibid, p.455.
- 7 Quoted in Millar, ibid., p.246.
- 8 Desmond Ball, 'US Installations in Australia', Australian National University Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Working Paper No.36, June 1981, pp.8-10.
- 9 For example, Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p.32.
- 10 United Nations, Demographic Indicators of Countries: Estimates and Projections as Assessed in 1980, United Nations, New York, 1982, pp.272, 280.
- 11 The pressure of overseas competition on Australian industry is not primarily of regional origin.

## LOW-LEVEL CONFLICT CONTINGENCIES AND AUSTRALIA

This section assesses the relevance and applicability of low-level contingencies to Australia's strategic environment.

### Colonial conflict and Australia

Australia is no longer a colonial power, and the prospect of low-level conflict arising as some form of indigenous national struggle against Australian sovereignty is all but inconceivable.

Indonesia's campaign of Confrontation against Malaysia is categorised in this study as interstate conflict, but it should be remembered that its inspiration was anti-colonialism. The possible application of a campaign of this nature against Australia is considered below as a variant of interstate conflict.

However colonial conflict could provide the basis for a potent defence strategy designed to deter threats of invasion and occupation of all or part of Australia. Should such threats materialise, colonial conflict could provide a strategy for continuing resistance, although it must be recognised that a colonial conflict strategy would not be as effective against an occupying power untroubled by domestic or international opinion or by human rights considerations as it was against the European liberal democracies after World War II. Nevertheless the lessons of colonial conflict could be applied as strategies and tactics of last resort, and at the very least a demonstrated preparedness to use them would raise the deterrence threshold.

The effectiveness of this strategy can be discerned in Japanese deliberations in 1942 on the question of an invasion of Australia. One of the reasons the Army General Staff recommended against invasion was that 'the Australians, in view of their national character, would resist to the end'.<sup>1</sup> The Army General Staff were probably correct, although knowledge of the reactions of unprepared civilians to Japanese attacks on Darwin might have tempered their advice somewhat. One wonders, however, whether resistance of a similar magnitude could be predicted with as much confidence for contemporary Australia. At the very

least, considerable advance preparation would be required before a willingness to resort to colonial conflict strategies would be viewed as a credible deterrent.

A further lesson Australia might adapt from the experience of colonial conflict is exploitation of the political elements of the contest. These would be particularly important if an aggressor was dependent on material and political support from third countries: an effective international political campaign could weaken this external support, consolidate and expand support from Australia's allies, and - if the prevailing global political winds were favourable - enable Australia to neutralise low-level conflict hostilities by raising the spectre of wider and higher-level conflict which neither superpower would tolerate. The circumstances of such a political campaign would be far removed from colonial conflict, but many of the underlying principles of asymmetric colonial conflict could still apply.

### **Interstate conflict and Australia**

As noted above, the scale, character, objectives and strategies of low-level interstate conflict are extremely variable. In applying the patterns of interstate conflict identified above to Australia's strategic environment two elements need to be addressed: motivation and capability. The former embraces the potential origins of conflict and the possible objectives of the initiator/aggressor, which are assessed below under the interrelated themes of historical enmity, politics and tribalism, territorial disputes, Antarctica, and resources disputes. The capabilities required to mount a campaign of low-level interstate conflict against Australia are examined separately.

#### **o Historical enmity**

Australia has no tradition of enmity against any state and enjoys generally amicable relations with its neighbours. Australia and New Zealand are culturally distinct from their predominantly Malay neighbours in South East Asia and their predominantly Melanesian neighbours in the South West Pacific, but these differences have not to date been a source of enmity or conflict.



o **Politics and tribalism**

We have seen that politics, ideology and tribalism-nationalism have been fertile sources of low-level conflict, and in principle there would seem to be some potential for interstate conflict developing between Australia and neighbouring Asian and Pacific states from these origins. Australia is a liberal democracy closely aligned to the Western bloc and has a developed economy. Its colonial experience was that of a European settlement and later a colonial power rather than a colony in the current sense of the term. Australia's Asian and Pacific neighbours have generally adapted inherited democratic forms of government to meet their own perceived needs and priorities. In comparison with Australia it could be said that most of them are rather less concerned with political and human rights and rather more concerned with the imperatives - and rewards - of nation-building. All of them are developing countries and most were former colonies. They all share the basic Third World perceptions of international society and support Third World claims and economic programs.

But if politics, ideology and nationalism have been important and occasionally decisive elements in some of the low-level interstate conflicts considered above, they have not reached a comparable intensity in Australia's neighbourhood. Indonesia's campaign of Confrontation against Malaysia has been the only interstate conflict at any level in Australia's neighbourhood since World War II, and, as noted above, it owed much to President Sukarno's personality and perceptions and to a unique combination of domestic and external political circumstances which seem unlikely to recur.<sup>2</sup> The differences in perceptions and values between Australia and its neighbouring Asian and Pacific states have at times produced tension and irritation, but the risk of open conflict has remained low. The possible reasons why interstate conflict has been a rare occurrence in Australia's region since World War II and has also been confined to low-level conflict could be debated at length, but from the political perspective there appear to be several relevant factors connected with the cultural inheritance of the region.

The indigenous South East Asian cultures in Australia's neighbourhood are deeply-entrenched, resilient and have assimilated a variety of foreign cultures and values. Malay culture, for example, accommodated first Hinduism and later Islam. The process of assimilation has hitherto tended to modify or dilute foreign cultural acquisitions, and the impact of revolutionary or messianic ideology - and its potential for inspiring interstate conflict - have consequently been blunted. It is arguable whether political and ideological motivations in interstate conflict can be distilled from other motivations, but it could nevertheless be argued that to date these motivations have figured less prominently in interstate relations between Australia's South East Asian neighbours than in the interstate relations of many other former colonies. Further, these countries have been pluralist societies for centuries, which may also have blunted the chauvinist spur to aggression. Empires and fiefdoms ebbed and flowed over the centuries of South East Asian history, but for a variety of reasons - which arguably included Hindu passivity, climate, the availability of land and resources for a relatively comfortable subsistence lifestyle and a parsimonious technological endowment - no tradition of aggression evolved on a scale comparable to Europe or the Middle East. Finally, all the South East Asian states concerned contain disparate and at times conflicting cultures, and their governments tend to be preoccupied with domestic politics, nation-building and development rather than external issues and adventures.

Perhaps the most distinctive features of the indigenous Melanesian cultures in Australia's neighbourhood are their cultural variety, small populations and lack of resources. In general their preoccupation with economic development and nation-building seems greater than in South East Asia, and interstate conflict directed against Australia is even less likely.

Will this relatively benign neighbourhood political environment endure? Given the pace of social and economic change and accompanying population growth rates (see p.30 above), it would seem unwise to assume that the absorptive capacities of these cultures will

necessarily continue to accommodate the accelerating pace of change. There is also some potential for conflict between neighbouring states. For example, the border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea could be a potential source of regional conflict; it could also be one which might involve Australia given our past and present associations with Papua New Guinea and our proximity to both countries. Australia's northern approaches would be vulnerable to a campaign of low-level harassment by Indonesian forces in the event of hostilities in which Australia declared its support for Papua New Guinea. This potential source of low-level conflict should nevertheless be kept in perspective, and concerns arising from geographic proximity and existing military capabilities should not obscure the realities of a changed domestic and international political environment from the days of Indonesia's Confrontation of Malaysia. Low-level conflict involving Australia seems most unlikely, but in the event that it did occur, it is quite conceivable that the prevailing circumstances may not be conducive to restricting it to a low-level.

In general, however, it would seem premature to assume that regional tensions will necessarily produce serious conflict; that domestic pressures for change will promote political dislocation or trauma; or that the consequences of change will necessarily threaten Australian interests. Australia's regional strategic environment could in practice become considerably less benign without a serious threat of interstate conflict developing. The only firm conclusion that can be drawn is that, as our strategic environment is undergoing a process of rapid change, Australia must maintain the capability to monitor and interpret these changes. It is quite conceivable that some of these changes may be to our advantage.

Could low-level interstate conflict develop with more distant states? It is difficult to visualise circumstances in which this might occur. It is highly unlikely that Australia could or would give adequate grounds for offence (e.g. through external adventures or gross discrimination against a minority group within Australia with overseas protectors), and any campaign of low-level conflict against Australia by a remote state would

almost certainly affect Australia's neighbours. It seems probable that any campaign of this nature would be part of a wider bid for power or influence, and would therefore be unlikely to remain low-level conflict.

- **Territorial disputes**

Territorial and resources claims are a fertile source of low-level interstate conflict, but, as the examples reviewed above indicate, these conflicts generally involved a history of conflict or enmity and/or a significant political/ideological quotient. They also tend to occur between contiguous neighbours or near neighbours.<sup>3</sup> Australia has no contiguous neighbours and no territorial or resources disputes with other states.

Australia has negotiated maritime boundaries with Papua New Guinea and France, which cover the Torres Strait and the Kerguelen Islands and New Caledonia. In 1971-72 Australia concluded a seabed boundary agreement with Indonesia extending from the Arafura Sea to an area south of West Timor, leaving a gap opposite then Portuguese Timor. The delimitation of the Timor gap and the western seabed boundary between Christmas Island and Java have not yet been negotiated, and Indonesia has indicated that it wants a more generous delimitation than in the earlier negotiations. In brief, Indonesia claims that there is a single continental shelf between the two countries and that a seabed boundary based on a median line is appropriate, while the Australian view is that there are two continental shelves with the Australian shelf extending to the Timor Trough immediately south of Timor. Indonesia views the Timor Trough as an accidental depression in the common continental shelf, and in a compromise solution in the 1971-72 negotiations the boundary was placed south of the trough's axis but still conceded more than 70 per cent of the seabed to Australia. A subsequent fisheries surveillance boundary settled on an agreed line much closer to the Indonesian median line than the Australian continental shelf line.

The seabed boundary delimitation between Australia and Indonesia is important to both countries given the potential resources at stake, which include oil and

natural gas fields. But competing negotiating goals do not necessarily produce disputes - or conflict. The negotiations may become sensitive and obviously contain some conflict potential, but there has been no indication that they might lead to any level of physical conflict. There are numerous competing claims in different parts of the world over maritime resources, but, unlike disputed territorial claims, very few have ended in open conflict. The armed forces of competing states have occupied otherwise uninhabited islands in the South China Sea in support of claims to them and to the appurtenant maritime zones, but even there open conflict has been minimal. Moreover, there are established precedents for resolving competing claims of this nature, for example through the establishment of a joint development zone. Australia's as yet unresolved seabed delimitation with Indonesia could conceivably be exploited as a source of conflict should a wider political confrontation develop, but the delimitation negotiations themselves need not become a source of conflict. At present there is no evidence or indication that this might occur.

Australia has not yet negotiated its maritime boundaries with the Solomon Islands and New Zealand. Both boundaries are relatively short and seem unlikely to pose difficulties.

- **Antarctica**

Australia's claim of sovereignty over nearly half of Antarctica (some 14 million square kilometres) is being challenged in company with the other Antarctic Treaty partners with equivalent claims. The challenge is being mounted in the United Nations by a number of Third World countries led by Malaysia who propose to apply the 'common heritage of mankind' concept developed in the Law of the Sea conference to Antarctica. Under this regime Antarctica would become an international trust territory administered by the United Nations or an international body established for this purpose and no claims of national sovereignty over the territory or its resources would be recognised. The nature and value of mineral resources in Antarctica are difficult to assess, but they include relatively low grade iron ore and coal.

The problems of extracting minerals in the Antarctic environment makes exploitation uneconomic at least for the immediate future, but food resources in the adjacent seas are abundant and could in principle be exploited using available technology.<sup>4</sup>

Australia has a long association with exploration and scientific activity in Antarctica, but it does not have any obvious vital national interests at stake in maintaining Australian sovereignty. Australia has acquired interests in and expertise about Antarctica and has a strong claim for participation in the establishment and management of any alternative Antarctic regime, but neither the strategic nor the resources potential of the frozen continent appear likely to jeopardise any vital Australian interests should sovereignty be transferred to a responsible and effective international authority. The present Antarctic Treaty provides that 'Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only';<sup>5</sup> it is unlikely that an international regime controlling Antarctica could do otherwise. In any event the Antarctic environment would pose immense difficulties for any attempts to station and operate military forces on a scale which might threaten Australian security. The few nations with these capabilities could threaten Australia more economically and effectively from more accessible bases. And Australia's abundance of natural resources would seem to pre-empt any prospect of dependence upon Antarctic food or mineral resources in the foreseeable future.

◦ **Resources disputes**

Resources claims and disputes do not figure prominently in the interstate conflicts examined above. The conflict between Argentina and Chile over the Beagle Channel delimitation was an incipient one, and in any event Chile's claims in the South Atlantic were opposed by Argentina on political as much as resources grounds. Britain's 'cod wars' with Iceland were more firmly based on a resources dispute, but the origins of this conflict stretch to the fifteenth century and the conflict quickly acquired domestic and international political aspects for both countries (see p.16 above).

It is thus difficult to contrive circumstances in which Australia might become involved in low-level interstate conflict arising largely from claims or disputes about resources. As Peter Hastings and Andrew Farran have observed, Australia has no resources analogous to Middle East oil which are vital global commodities and which could seriously affect world markets (and possibly provoke conflict) if withheld.<sup>6</sup> World food production is keeping pace with population growth and the general global food outlook appears promising in all regions except South Asia and the Sahel region in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Any 'conflict' involving Australia over resources issues seems likely to be confined to competition to maintain and expand Australia's overseas markets against increasing international competition. The only resource that Australia might withhold from world markets is uranium, which is readily available elsewhere and which appears to have a problematic future as an economic source of electric power generation.

Australia's domestic market for imports is an artificial rather than a natural resource, but some observers predict that the pressures from neighbouring countries to admit their exports will increase and may adversely affect Australia's political relations with them.<sup>8</sup> Terms of trade have not figured as a source of low-level conflict in any of the examples of interstate conflict examined above: could they become a source of such conflict between Australia and its neighbours?

In the late 1970s Australia was subjected to trenchant criticism by the then five ASEAN countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand - for its protectionist trade policies. This criticism intensified in 1978-79 when Singapore led an ASEAN attack on Australia's new International Civil Aviation Policy as another manifestation of protectionism. Although retaliatory action was threatened, in practice none of the governments concerned embarked on this course directly and a brief boycott of Australian products by Singapore trade unions had no significant impact on Australian trade.

Criticism of Australian protectionism and demands for improved access to the Australian market in ASEAN councils subsequently abated, although the issue remains one of continuing concern to the ASEAN countries. The main factors in the moderation of the ASEAN position appear to have been recognition that the size of the Australian market is such that even a laissez faire trade policy would make relatively little difference to ASEAN exporters, and that in any event Australia is not the only - nor necessarily the worst - offender in protecting its domestic industries. The ASEAN countries also appear to have acquired a greater appreciation of the domestic economic, social and political consequences in Australia of a flood of ASEAN imports.

The suggestion that any of Australia's trading partners might threaten or resort to low-level interstate violence to force exports on the unwilling Australian consumer is bizarre, although complaints about Australian protectionism could conceivably figure in a wider list of complaints which taken together might lead to low-level conflict. But the relatively small size of the potential Australian market and Australia's potential importance as a source of raw materials and foodstuffs make it extremely unlikely that differences over terms of trade alone could escalate into low-level conflict. Problems of lesser magnitudes might arise if Australia were to withhold its exports of foodstuffs and raw materials, but once again it is difficult to contrive a situation in which it would serve Australian interests to do so. The ASEAN countries can be expected to press hard for the best terms of trade they can extract from Australia, but it is a very long step from contesting terms of trade by conventional means to pursuing such claims by resort to low-level conflict.

o **Capabilities**

The present absence of potential sources of or motivation for low-level interstate conflict posits a relatively benign regional strategic environment, but one should not overlook the fact that all regional states (including Australia) possess varying capabilities to initiate such conflict against each other (see Annex A). In addition,



Australia's relatively remote, sparsely-populated and resource-rich northern approaches appear peculiarly vulnerable to many low-level contingencies (raids, harassment, temporary lodgements etc.). The resources required to pursue low-level conflict strategies are obviously less than those required for high-level conflict and can in principle be met from forces-in-being at short notice. Thus should the strategic policies, motives or objectives of a regional state change, it would already possess the option to pursue low-level conflict strategies. These capabilities alone impose an obligation on Australian defence planners to take due account of the implications of low-level conflict contingencies for Australia's security.

### Internal conflict and Australia

It seems inconceivable that the seeds of the internal conflicts examined above (p.17) could take root in contemporary Australian political, economic or social soil. The conflicts all attracted varying and usually significant degrees of external intervention, but in every case the conflict had domestic origins and the instigators were indigenous, although their objectives, rhetoric and tactics were often influenced by or imported from foreign sources. Australia simply lacks the basic ingredients for conflicts of this nature: it is culturally homogeneous, has a responsive and generally equitable structure of government, its citizens enjoy a relatively high and broadly even standard of living, and Australian society has demonstrated a capacity to respond and adapt to economic and social change. It is not an environment conducive to low-level internal conflict.

Nevertheless the strategies and tactics of internal conflict - like those of colonial conflict - could yield useful lessons for planning the defence of Australia. An understanding of the origins and nature of internal low-level conflict could also assist our understanding of our regional strategic environment, which includes a number of states with some experience of and potential for internal conflict. Australia need not - and arguably should not - seek any interventionist role should serious internal conflict occur in

neighbouring states, but it must be recognised that such conflict could have important implications for Australia's security - not least through the refugee exodus and external intervention that this form of conflict can precipitate.

### Conclusion

The record of low-level conflict contingencies examined above contains some insights and lessons for Australian defence policy, but the experience of such conflict since World War II seems to have little direct application to Australia's strategic environment. The tactics employed by an initiator/aggressor can be visualised in the Australian context, but none of the varied origins of the conflicts reviewed above, nor the objectives of the opposing groups, translate as easily. In brief, it would seem that if politics have to date been a fundamental element of low-level conflict, this element is conspicuously lacking in Australia's contemporary strategic environment.

The lessons for Australia that can be distilled from past experience of low-level conflict appear reassuring in Australia's current strategic environment, but it should not be assumed that the future will resemble the past. The evolution of conflict this century indicates that it would be unwise to assume that future variants will conform to past patterns. Demands on limited or scarce resources arising from rapid population growth could precipitate many levels of conflict, and the evolution of ideologies could alter Australia's strategic environment by introducing the political demands and pressures which are currently absent but which seem a prerequisite for low-level conflict. A revolutionary or messianic religious upheaval or the translation of the 'common heritage of mankind' concept into specific demands on Australia and its resources could also transform Australia's strategic environment in a relatively short period of time.

Technological change may also make low-level conflict a more feasible, effective or attractive proposition. The stakes in high-level conventional conflict may, like nuclear conflict, become too great to risk except in situations

involving national survival. Developments in weapons technology may enhance the political and military effectiveness and potential rewards of low-level conflict.

Another assumption about low-level conflict that should be qualified is that it need not necessarily remain low-level. The examples of low-level conflict reviewed above by definition remained thus, but it must be borne in mind that high-level conflict can begin at a low-level and escalate through the continuum between them. Possible constraints on escalation may not be present or immediately apparent, and assumptions about the intrinsic nature of low-level conflict could prove disastrously wrong if such conflict was in fact the beginning of high-level conflict. The lessons of history can be instructive, but they are not immutable.

### Notes

- 1 Quoted in Annexure C of Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p.62.
- 2 See J.A.C. Mackie, Konfrontasi: The Indonesia-Malaysia Dispute 1963-1966, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, pp.333-335.
- 3 In his analysis of Lewis F. Richardson's statistical study of war, David Wilkinson concluded that 'the probability that any pair of groups will fight is increased by their being neighbours'. David Wilkinson, Deadly Quarrels: Lewis F. Richardson and the Statistical Study of War, University of California Press, Berkley, 1980, p.118.
- 4 See Peter Hastings and Andrew Farran (eds), Australia's Resources Future, Nelson/Australian Institute of International Affairs, Melbourne, 1978, pp.246-248.
- 5 Quoted in T.B. Millar, Australia in Peace and War, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978, p.458.
- 6 Peter Hastings and Andrew Farran, ibid, p.244.
- 7 Ross Thomas and Noel Hodgson, 'World Food and Population' in Hastings and Farran, ibid, pp.152-153.
- 8 For example, Hastings and Farran, ibid., p.232.

**PART 2**  
**LOW-LEVEL CONTINGENCIES AND**  
**AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE POLICY**

**THE EVOLUTION OF AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE POLICY**

**Introduction**

Australia's contemporary defence policy is the product of a unique, consistent and relatively long evolutionary process. This inheritance appears to exert a powerful influence on contemporary perceptions of Australia's strategic and defence policy options. The most enduring feature of Australian defence and foreign policy has been the degree of dependence on a protector sought and maintained by successive generations of Australian leaders. One commentator dubbed loyalty to a protector 'the central idea of Australian policy' and added the pertinent observation that

Most nations forced by circumstances to depend on a protector try to maximise their independence. Australia's peculiarity is that it has tried to maximise its dependence.<sup>1</sup>

This policy of dependence on a protector was arguably consistent with Australia's interests and strategic environment from the time of European settlement until 1945. It was a logical and generally effective response given Australia's strategic situation and defence resources, the availability of acceptable protectors, and the course of Australia's colonial and post-colonial development. The continued cultivation of this level of dependence during the 1950s and 1960s seems less soundly based, but nevertheless consistent with past experience and the prevailing perceptions of Australia's security interests. The enunciation of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 and 1970 and the accompanying withdrawal of United States forces from mainland South East Asia weakened the keystone of the policy of dependence - the availability of an acceptable protector - and precipitated a policy reappraisal which is still in progress. The 1976 White Paper on Australian Defence acknowledged that increased self-reliance

had become a primary requirement,<sup>2</sup> but so far this assessment has not been translated into either defence doctrine or capabilities.

### **Criteria for protectors**

A defence policy of dependence on a protector is only feasible if the protector is available, willing and apparently capable of providing the required level of protection on acceptable terms, and is thus recognised by potential enemies. The relationship between the protected and the protecting powers implies at the very least an agreed basis of mutual or complementary interests to be protected and effective communication between them. The dependability and durability of the relationship would be affected by the participants' compatibility in terms of culture and values, which would affect their communication and their perceptions of their respective interests. Interests, perceptions and capabilities could all be expected to alter over time, and both parties would need to maintain a capacity to monitor and respond to these changes.

### **Colonial Australia**

The Australian colonies had no formal responsibilities for foreign or defence policy until federation in 1901, but from the time of European settlement the colonists manifested a marked concern about defence and security matters. These included the perceived need to forestall other European settlement on the Australian continent and adjacent Pacific Islands; concern to resist Asian and Pacific migration to Australia; and the need to develop an indigenous defence capacity to supplement local British forces as European powers and later Japan became interested in the south-west Pacific.<sup>3</sup> The colonists' recurring fears about external threats or interference were compounded by their consciousness of remoteness from their protector and by their meagre and scattered numbers. Both considerations continue to affect perceptions in contemporary Australian defence debates.

### Britain as protector

The unique relationship between the Australian colonies and Britain was a central element in Australia's colonial and early post-colonial development. The course of European power politics, the pre-eminence of the Royal Navy and the more immediate attractions of the United States of America for European emigrants combined to produce a relatively homogeneous settler population which remained securely within Britain's orbit. White settlement was not contested by any large or organised indigenous population and the Australian colonists were not subsequently forced to adapt to the existence of a substantial indigenous society. European settlement in Australia thus retained a marked British identity for most of the nineteenth century - not least because it was spared both the diverse cultural origins of the American and Canadian immigrants and the resistance from an indigenous population encountered by European colonists in South Africa.

The close identification of identity and interests between the Australian colonies and Britain provided the foundation for the policy of dependency on a protector which endures today. Such dependency was natural in the early days of settlement, but its persistence after the colonies achieved self-government in the latter half of the nineteenth century is exceptional. The assertive 'bush nationalism' of the 1890s derided many British institutions and values and seemed to assert a unique Australian identity, yet the 'bush proletariat' enthusiastically endorsed the bargain struck between their leaders and their imperial protector: that Australia would contribute to the defence of imperial interests within the limits of its resources in return for British undertakings to defend Australia. Australians enlisted in substantial numbers to serve in imperial wars and campaigns in the Sudan, against the Boxer Rebellion in China, in the Boer War and in World War I. The only significant opposition in Australia to the imperial cause surfaced against conscription proposals in World War I, and sank thereafter. Australia maintained its policy of dependence on a protector until in 1941 the protector was revealed to be incapable of fulfilling its side of the bargain. Confronted by the threat of invasion by a hostile major power - and comforted by the availability of an alternative

protector - Australia responded by changing protectors. In the prevailing circumstances it was understandable that the utility of the policy itself passed apparently unquestioned.

### **The United States of America as protector**

The United States of America fulfilled all the criteria for a protector insofar that in 1941 it was a substantial and compatible Pacific power that was available, willing and capable of providing the level of protection Australia needed. It formally assumed the mantle of protector with the ANZUS Treaty of 1951, and Australia upheld its side of the bargain. Australian forces served alongside United States forces in Korea and Vietnam; Australian forces also served with Commonwealth formations in Malaya (and later Malaysia) in campaigns which the United States supported short of direct military intervention.

The nature of Australia's dependency on the United States was qualitatively different from its former dependency on Britain. It is unlikely that Australia's close identification with British interests and acquiescence to British leadership in foreign and defence policy would have survived the war even if Britain had been able to offer credible protection against a Japanese assault. The impact of the war on Australian and British interests, perceptions and societies seems likely to have altered the nature of their special relationship regardless of the level of Britain's residual influence in Asia and the Pacific. In the immediate post-war years the Australian Labor Party discarded its pre-war isolationism and pursued a distinctively Australian foreign policy. Successive Australian governments sought to develop an indigenous capacity to analyse and assess Australia's strategic environment and external interests to enable them to weigh the potential risks and returns of their defence and foreign policy options. Australia's level of military dependence on United States protection was arguably comparable to its former dependence on Britain, but the Australian governments of the period did not seek to transfer Australia's former dependence on Whitehall for policy, representation and intelligence to Washington.

The United States remains capable of protecting Australia in virtually all conceivable strategic circumstances, but the Vietnam debacle, the 'Nixon Doctrine' and the preoccupations and constraints of superpower status have raised some reservations and doubts about its availability and willingness. The implications for Australian defence doctrine of this somewhat uncertain and qualified dependency on a protector have now been debated for over a decade without substantive results, and the debate seems set to continue.

### The inheritance

The course of the evolution of Australian defence policy has produced a strong tradition of dependency on a protector based on Australia's willingness to contribute to the defence of the protector's overseas interests in return for guarantees that the protector will defend Australia against external aggression. Australia upheld its side of the bargain in wars and campaigns ranging in time and place from the Sudan to Vietnam, and its force structure evolved accordingly. Australia's forces evolved on the premise of compatibility with the protector's counterparts and a related reliance on the protector's support facilities. The consequences of this dependence include a marked lack of experience in joint operations between elements of the Australian defence forces, a concern to maintain 'state of the art' capabilities equivalent to those maintained by the protector, and a consequent orientation towards doctrine and equipment developed and designed for foreign strategic and physical environments. This inheritance has inevitably influenced Australian perceptions of low-level conflict contingencies and their relevance to Australian defence policy.

### Notes

- 1 Bruce Grant, The Crisis of Loyalty, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p.1.



- 2 Australian Parliament, Australian Defence (White Paper presented to Parliament by the Minister for Defence, the Hon. D.J. Killen, November 1976), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976, p.10.
- 3 For example, see T.B. Millar, Australia in Peace and War, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978, pp.55-57 and 90-94.

## LOW-LEVEL CONFLICT CONTINGENCIES AND AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE POLICY

This section examines the role and perceptions of low-level conflict contingencies in contemporary Australian defence policy.

### Present historical

The tradition of dependency on a protector remains entrenched notwithstanding official acknowledgement of the importance of increased self-reliance. The 1976 White Paper on Australian Defence described increased self-reliance as 'a primary requirement', but qualified this finding with the comforting observation that

Our alliance with the US gives substantial grounds for confidence that in the event of a fundamental threat to Australia's security, US military support would be forthcoming.<sup>1</sup>

In November 1983 the Minister for Defence, Mr Gordon Scholes, alluded to his participation in a 'major review of the ANZUS Treaty' in the following terms:

Despite changes that have taken place in the world since the treaty was signed, we concluded that the basic interests of the three parties still coincided. At the same time it was recognised that each party needed to provide for its own security, as far as its resources would allow.<sup>2</sup>

This statement reaffirmed both the bargain between Australia and its protector enunciated in the ANZUS Treaty and the limits of self-reliance.

But contemporary Australian defence policy is not entirely the product of a unique historical experience: its inertia also owes much to the absence of a defined or definable security threat. In the words of the then Minister for Defence, Mr D.J. Killen, in a written statement to the JCFAD Sub-Committee on Defence Matters in March 1981, 'there is no tangible identifiable threat'.<sup>3</sup> Unlike their NATO counterparts, Australia's defence planners do not have a clearly defined threat with an attendant order of battle and

strategic and tactical doctrine to counter. In recent years Australian defence planners have adopted a 'core force' approach, defined in March 1981 by the then Chief of Defence Force Staff (Admiral Synnot) to the JCFAD Sub-Committee on Defence Matters in the following terms:

At present, without one specific threat to meet, we have a core force which has a basis for expansion in a number of different directions ... The core force is not static because the threats are changing all the time ... It should be capable of meeting any likely short term, low-level contingencies because those are the ones that could come without warning.<sup>4</sup>

Thus in the absence of both overseas commitments in support of the protector and a defined threat to Australia's security, the force-in-being has been rationalised as an expansion base in part designed to meet low-level contingencies.<sup>5</sup> What low-level contingencies are canvassed, and what impact has the approach had on defence doctrine and defence force structure?

#### **Objectives versus tactics**

A striking feature of the Australian debate about low-level conflict contingencies is a tendency to focus on tactics or hostile actions without confronting the origins, political context, objectives or strategies instructing them. Admiral Synnot described low-level contingencies in terms of their form: raids or terrorist acts on mainland Australia or on offshore oil rigs.<sup>6</sup> He did not speculate on their inspiration or objectives. Other informed observers have acknowledged the political aspects of low-level contingencies, but few have developed them into realistic scenarios. Commodore Gray, for example, speculated that low-level contingencies

could occur where the aggressor wished to apply military pressures, or pressures requiring a military response to achieve political objectives which he has been unable to achieve through other means.<sup>7</sup>

Gray identified a number of pertinent factors that would determine the nature and extent of such conflict and listed a range of tactics that might be used, but he did not speculate upon the possible origins of conflict or the aggressor's objectives.

Perhaps the most detailed attempt to explore the possible motives or objectives of an initiator/aggressor of low-level conflict against Australia is contained in the JCFAD report Threats to Australia's Security. The Committee acknowledged that the motives for such action were hypothetical and difficult to visualise, but suggested that they could develop for several possible reasons:

- (a) to weaken Australia's commitment to the Western Alliance in a period of superpower tension;
- (b) to achieve short-term or long-term political or economic objectives (e.g. control of Australian territory to gain access to onshore or offshore resources, to establish bases on - or maritime claims from - island territories);
- (c) to gain direct control of the resources of an under-utilised or less-populated part of Australia (e.g. in the event of great internal disorder within Australia or Australia's inability to supply foreign markets with important resources);
- (d) to exploit serious ideological or other divisions in Australia should they occur;
- (e) to pressure or punish Australia through acts of terrorism in support of political objectives or dissident or minority groups within Australia.<sup>8</sup>

None of these motives or objectives seem plausible in Australia's present circumstances. It is difficult to envisage how low-level threats could weaken Australia's commitment to the Western Alliance: given Australia's history of dependency, such action would probably strengthen this commitment. In the unlikely event that Australia was a focus of superpower tension, it would probably be a contingency in which the protector's assistance could be guaranteed; it would also seem prone to escalation above low-level conflict. But as Australia's strategic importance to either superpower is not particularly great and would be eclipsed by that of

a number of other states, Australia seems a very unlikely target for this form of superpower confrontation. In short, the possible benefits of this strategy would seem elusive and far outweighed by the attendant risks.

With regard to JCFAD scenario (b), we have seen that Australia has no territorial or resources disputes and at present the remaining maritime border delimitations seem unlikely to yield any. If a hostile state sought control of Australian territory or resources its claim would most probably be based on force of arms alone, and if pursued, such conflict seems unlikely to remain low-level for long. The prospect of 'great internal disorder' within Australia (JCFAD scenarios (c) and (d)) also seems extremely remote, and Australia contains no vital resources that cannot be obtained from other suppliers. The absence of exploitable internal divisions or externally defensible claims against Australia's resources greatly diminishes the potential value of the tactics of low-level conflict in support of them.

By a process of elimination one could conclude that acts of terrorism in pursuit of political objectives (JCFAD scenario (e)) seem the most plausible threat, although Australia's homogeneous and basically egalitarian society would be rather less susceptible to this affliction than many others. At this time it seems most unlikely that any neighbouring states would support such acts, and it would be difficult for more remote states to tender support on any significant scale. It is difficult to foresee acts of terrorism in Australia reaching a level which might require extensive or continuing support of the civil power by the defence forces.

The most elaborate low-level conflict scenario to date was that devised for Exercise Kangaroo 83. The basis for the campaign of low-level conflict mounted in north-west Australia by the mythical state of Kamaria is instructive: Australia's refusal to issue fishing licences and a sudden price rise for Australian bauxite imported by Kamaria's alumina plants. The scenario presupposed that Kamaria had a developed fishing industry with established fishing rights in Australian waters, and that it had no alternative bauxite suppliers. Neither contin-

gency is in fact applicable to Australia. The British-Icelandic 'cod wars' suggest that fishing disputes with the right mix of history, economics and politics can lead to low-level conflict, but notwithstanding current and past tensions involving Persian Gulf states, there do not appear to have been any outbreaks of low-level conflict arising from a refusal to supply a particular resource. The Kangaroo 83 exercise scenario provided a structure for a useful and imaginative defence exercise, but neither source of provocation for conflict seems directly applicable to contemporary Australia.

### **Defence doctrine and force structure**

Defence doctrine and force structure are notoriously resistant to change, the inertia of the latter being partly a consequence of the lifetime of major weapons systems. This inertia is particularly marked in Australian defence doctrine and force structure which evolved on the premise of dependence on a protector; have hitherto been oriented towards overseas service supplementing the protector's forces; and have only recently begun to address the strategic and tactical problems of the defence of Australia and the implications of a policy of increased self-reliance. One consequence of this inertia has been a tendency to favour weapons systems replacements incorporating 'state of the art' capabilities developed by Australia's protector and other allies for very different strategic environments. The initial specifications for the replacement tactical fighter favoured air superiority, which has little obvious application to the defence of Australia. As Andrew Farran has pointed out, its advocates presuppose 'a Battle-of-Britain situation'<sup>9</sup> which is at best highly improbable. In the event the F/A-18 Hornet was selected in part because of its maritime interdiction capabilities, which signified a welcome advance towards a weapons systems replacement doctrine more oriented to the defence of Australia.

But the fixation on 'state of the art' equipment replacement which places undue emphasis on the capabilities of allies at the expense of Australia's defence environment remains entrenched. The Army continues to accept the utility of operating tanks in the defence of

Australia, and the Royal Australian Navy almost succeeded in its campaign to replace the aircraft carrier 'Melbourne'. The Navy was ultimately defeated more on grounds of cost rather than doctrine.

In fairness to Australia's military planners one must acknowledge that the absence of a defined threat to Australia's security facilitates this doctrinal and structural inertia. Admiral Synnot made a spirited defence of current defence doctrine and force structure to the JCFAD in March 1981 in response to reported criticism of the 'core force' concept by Drs O'Neill and Ball of the ANU Strategic and Defence Studies Centre:

If Dr Ball can tell us that the terminal force has to meet a certain threat, that it is the only threat we are likely to get and it will be in 25 years, our job would be easy. But nobody in the world can say what the threat will be in 25 years. We think it would be irresponsible to have a force in being ... which is tailored narrowly to meet that one terminal threat, because we could get it wrong ... So we believe that, until we can estimate with confidence what that terminal threat is to be, we must keep our options open; otherwise we are not being responsible.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of a 'terminal threat' clearly inhibits Australian defence planning, and the dynamic nature of Australia's regional strategic environment suggests that Admiral Synnot's advocacy of a flexible force structure which could be adapted to meet a variety of needs is well based. But these considerations need not inhibit the development of defence doctrine set firmly within Australia's strategic environment and which draws very selectively on those elements of the doctrine and capabilities of Australia's allies that are applicable to this environment. The adoption of a low-level conflict scenario for Kangaroo 83 suggests that defence doctrine may be shifting course in this direction, albeit to date with little impact on force structure. Kangaroo 83 employed an artificial low-level conflict contingency scenario to exercise the existing force structure and explore some of the implications of civil-military

cooperation in the defence of remote areas in northern Australia. Nevertheless its focus on the defence of Australia and combined operations between the Australian services could prove to be a significant point of divergence in the slow evolution of a truly Australian defence policy.

### **Future perfect?**

The experience of low-level conflict since World War II suggests at least five general conclusions about the nature of low-level conflict and its relevance to Australia. First, it seems neither easy nor advantageous to attempt to classify conflict into discrete levels or categories; conflict categories based on the defence capabilities of a single state appear particularly artificial.

Secondly, a fundamental characteristic of low-level conflict to date has been its substantial political quotient, which should not be obscured by the strategies or tactics employed in such conflicts.

Thirdly, while Australia's present strategic situation does not correspond with any of the low-level conflict profiles reviewed above, this does not necessarily confer immunity. The very variable and political nature of low-level conflict, the relatively limited resources required to initiate it, and the dynamic nature of Australia's regional strategic environment all suggest that Australia cannot afford to neglect such contingencies.

Fourthly, the historical record suggests that it would be unwise to assume that future low-level conflicts will conform to established patterns. Interstate conflict has undergone many transformations this century, and low-level conflict has taken many forms since World War II. It can be assumed that such change will continue, and that political and technological change - and conceivably global strategic changes - could affect the nature of low-level conflict, Australia's strategic environment, and the potential for low-level conflict within it. Australia's unique geography and demography (notably its size, relative isolation and resource and population distribution) would seem to render it potentially more vulnerable to many low-level conflict strategies than most of its geographically smaller or more



closely-settled allies. The deliberate introduction of exotic diseases amongst Australian livestock, for example, could be a devastating and relatively easily accomplished low-level conflict strategy which would exploit some of Australia's unique vulnerabilities. It would also mark a new departure for low-level conflict and would in part reflect advances in technology which make this capability more accessible than before.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it cannot be assumed that low-level conflict will necessarily remain thus. The examples reviewed above were by definition those with effective inhibitions on escalation to higher levels of conflict. The record of interstate conflict as a whole since World War II contains numerous examples in which low-level conflict was a prelude for or a step towards high-level conflict. Any assessments of low-level conflicts or low-level conflict contingencies obviously need to take account of the inhibitions (or potential inhibitions) to escalation arising from the adversaries' respective capabilities or from relevant political or strategic factors. It cannot be assumed that such inhibitions will necessarily be present or, if initially present, that they will be unaffected by the course of the conflict.

Against this background, the implications of low-level conflict contingencies for Australian defence policy can be divided into four main elements. First, Australia needs to maintain a capability to monitor and analyse external political, economic, military and other developments which might contain the potential for generating low-level conflicts involving Australia. This capability would obviously also cover higher levels of potential conflict, but a primary requirement at the lower end of the conflict spectrum would be a capacity to understand and interpret the often complex political elements which appear to be recurring constituents of such conflicts.

Secondly, Australia should maintain a capability to respond promptly and effectively to counter those low-level conflict contingencies assessed likely to arise or which could arise at very short notice. As minimal resources are required to initiate a campaign of low-level conflict, an aggressor can generally initiate a campaign of this nature at very short notice using existing forces and equipment. It appears probable that any low-level conflict involving Australia would be of external rather than internal origin,

and would therefore involve some form of sovereignty infringement. An effective Australian response would require surveillance and mobility capabilities of a reasonably high order, which would in turn require close cooperation between elements of the Australian armed services and between the armed services and civilian authorities along the lines explored in the scenario for Exercise Kangaroo 83. The capability to respond to a campaign of externally-directed low-level conflict would also imply a flexible strike capacity affording a selection of responses against the aggressor and/or against the regional bases and resources supporting the campaign. The mix of desirable retaliatory capabilities could be debated at length, but at the very least it should encompass sufficient flexibility to avoid a choice between escalation or defeat.

Thirdly, the experience of low-level conflict since World War II suggests some potent defence strategies which in the Australian context would probably amount to strategies of last resort against an invading or occupying force. The ultimate effectiveness of such strategies would depend on many variables, but the capability itself could raise the deterrence threshold significantly.

Finally, the limits of the implications of low-level conflict contingencies for Australian defence policy should be recognised. At present low-level conflict contingencies seem no more threatening to Australia's interests or security than their higher level counterparts. In Australia's current and foreseeable strategic situation it seems sensible to assume that any conflict contingency could contain the seeds of escalation, and to maintain a capability to identify and respond selectively to a broad spectrum of conflict contingencies.

It could also be argued that the debate about low-level conflict contingencies has a role in the slow evolution of an Australian defence policy. Their invocation has focussed the debate more sharply on issues associated with the defence of Australia, and might in time contribute to changes in Australian defence attitudes and perceptions which in their essentials are remarkably compatible with those of the early European colonists.

## Notes

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- 3 Incorporated into the Hansard record of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, 18 March 1981, p.1643.
- 4 Hansard, ibid, p.1680-1681.
- 5 The rationale for the 'core force' was also enunciated in the Minister for Defence's written statement to the Committee (Hansard, ibid, p.1642).
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- 7 K.D. Gray, 'Some Defence Concepts for Australia', Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia, Vol.3, No.2, November 1980.
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## ANNEXURE A

### A STATISTICAL PROFILE OF AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

	Australia	N.Z.	ASEAN COUNTRIES					INDONESIA COUNTRIES			P.H.C.				
			Brunei		Indonesia		Malaysia		Philippines			Singapore		Thailand	Vietnam
			Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Cambodia	Laos						
Area '000 sq km	7,482	269	na	1,919	330	797	0.6	513	0.6	181	269	333	662		
Population	15.0	3.1	0.2	151.3	16.7	51.6	2.5	49.8	6.5	3.7	56.6	3.3	3.3		
State (million) 1982	0.8	0.9	2.4	1.7	2.4	2.6	1.2	2.1	5.0	2.4	2.4	2.8	2.8		
% average annual growth 1976-82	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na		
Born/Abroad % 2000	11.2/88.8	15.2/84.8	na	79.8/20.2	70.4/29.6	63.8/36.2	25.9/74.1	85.6/14.4	86.1/13.9	86.4/13.6	80.2/19.8	72.0/28.0	na		
Population year 2000 (million)	17.8	4.0	na	198.7	21.3	77.0	2.9	68.6	10.6	5.7	78.9	5.2	5.2		
Born/Abroad % projected year 2000	7.4/92.6	10.4/89.6	na	67.7/32.3	58.4/41.6	51.0/49.0	21.5/78.5	76.8/23.2	76.3/23.7	76.9/23.1	69.8/30.2	62.2/37.8	na		
Population year 2000 (million)	19.6	4.6	na	238.4	27.5	102.5	3.2	86.4	13.4	7.8	100.8	7.4	7.4		
Born/Abroad % projected year 2000	5.3/94.7	7.4/92.6	na	51.9/48.1	43.2/56.8	36.9/63.1	15.2/84.8	61.7/38.3	61.1/38.9	59.4/40.6	53.9/46.1	30.0/70.0	na		
Production and Prices	152.66	17.3	na	04	25.7	10.9	12.4	39.3	na	na	na	9.0	2.14		
Manufacturing % of GDP	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na		
Per capita Income (US\$)	8,658	5,540	na	520	1,797	815	4,071	815	na	na	160	800	na		
% 1970-80 GDP growth	na	na	na	7.5	11.2	6.0	14.8	18.0	na	na	na	2.4	0.2		
Agriculture as % of GDP	6.94	10.3	na	26.0	23.4	na	na	24.8	na	na	45.0	na	na		
Inflation % of GDP	20.64	33.0	na	41.2	20.4	37.5	22.9	27.9	na	na	na	26.0	na		
Defence	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na		
TOTAL Armed Forces 1982	73.2	12.9	3.2	269.0	99.1	112.8	42.0	233.1	c 20.0	48.7	1,009.0	3.8	na		
Expenditure as % of GDP	4.78	6.3	c 195	2,692	2,055	862	707	1,306	na	na	na	na	38		
% GDP 1981	3.0	2.2	na	3.3	8.3	2.2	5.7	3.5	na	na	na	na	0.8		
% Public Expenditure 1981	c 10.0	4.9	na	12.3	19.7	12.7	15.6	19.3	na	na	na	na	3.0		
Foreign Trade	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na		
Exports as % of GDP	28.04	30.3	108.0	37.0	86.2	36.0	289.0	47.0	na	na	na	na	55.0		
Imports as % of GDP	21.90	20.8	599	9,154	11,760	6,959	27,346	11,897	na	na	1,080	862	na		
Merchandise exports	21,706	4,889	4,072	21,867	11,432	4,457	10,791	7,991	na	na	369	1,018	na		
Balance of payments 1981 (US\$ million)	+1,362	-652	+3,472	+1,869	-1,903	-587	+910	-3,289	na	na	-248	-46	na		

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