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CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE ARMY –
A GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE
ARMY FUTURE FORCE STRUCTURE OPTIONS
CONFERENCE

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It’s a great pleasure to be here this morning at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s Army Future Force Structure Options Conference.

Thank you to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute for putting this event together.

This conference is very timely, as we face a transformative period in our region and around the world, and as we reform the Australian Defence Force and, of course, the Australian Army.

Your work today, and your continuing work, will be essential to the Army’s successful transformation. This transformation is new, but change itself is nothing new. The enduring nature of war, with its constants of friction, danger, uncertainty and chance, nonetheless implies change. It is unpredicted change that leads to friction. Change is an inherent aspect of uncertainty and chance. This is true both at the tactical and the strategic level.

The Australian Army has shown itself capable of adapting in response to changing strategic circumstances, technological advances and social change throughout its history. Today, technological advances and global transformation are giving Army a more integral role in our overall defence strategy. And the Government will continue to depend on the Army to be capable of deployments further afield when called upon.

I am confident that today’s Army is well positioned to meet and overcome the coming change, because resilience and innovation is a characteristic of our Army. And these changes are, in many ways, the logical extension of changes the Australian Army has been leading for 100 years.

During this opening address, I wish to expand on this subject of change and address:

1. the requirements the Government has of the Army,
2. the challenges the Army faces, and
3. how Government will support Defence and the Army through this period of change.

1. Government’s future requirement of Army

Australia requires a potent, versatile and modern army that provides an essential contribution to the security of the nation, by protecting its interests and people. The more uncertain future strategic environment means that our armed forces must be prepared for a diverse range of possible operational requirements.

In coming years, the Government will expect the Australian Defence Force to be able to defend Australia and its national interests; play an active role in contributing to regional security and stability; and, make meaningful contributions to coalition operations across the world. Our interests are engaged globally and the Army and the ADF must be able to act globally, when directed by the Government to do so.

The lessons of both history and geography are explicit—we are not surrounded by a sea-air gap, but rather live amid a densely populated archipelago, which constitutes a “sea-air-land bridge” to our northern approaches. The ability to deploy within the “sea-air-land bridge” on our northern
approaches is the unique contribution of land forces within the ADF Joint Force executing a coherent maritime strategy.

Australia is one of a small number of nations among relatively sophisticated medium powers for whom local sea control, albeit for particular periods of time, is both possible and indeed a strongly desirable capability objective. A medium weight army is an essential element of this joint force to provide an enduring land force presence to secure the sea-air-land bridge. The structure of the post-Beersheba Army will provide the flexibility, endurance and concurrency essential for achieving this direction. The ADF is also likely to operate in a coalition environment. The Army retains the capacity to command and lead a multi-national coalition through the generation of a Joint Inter Agency Task Force.

Australia strongly supports the continued engagement and enhanced presence of the United States in the region as it underpins strategic stability through its network of alliances and security partnerships, its force posture, and its contribution to regional cooperation. Army’s capacity to support this objective comes from its ability to deploy tailored and scalable land forces that are largely self-sufficient and sustainable, in response to contingencies, in coalition with the US and regional partners.

Australia has a strategic interest in an international order that restrains aggression and manages strategic risks and threats effectively, both within the Indo-Pacific and around the world. On occasion, the Government may use the ADF’s capabilities to assist the international community in dealing with these risks and threats. Again, the Army’s capacity to support this objective comes from its ability to deploy tailored and scalable land forces in response to contingencies.

Forces may deploy with little or no warning time to unanticipated areas of operation. This requires Army to ensure that it is trained and equipped to fight and win decisively on arrival into a theatre providing the force and appropriate blend of firepower, mobility and protection. The flexibly and robust adaptability that come from demanding training and high-quality people and equipment are the key characteristics of a medium-weight army.

Army also provides the core elements that contribute to the ADF Special Operations capability. These troops retain very specific roles and are enabled by Joint and inter-agency capabilities. The next White Paper will ensure continued investment in our Special Operations capability, especially in an environment with an increased threat of terrorism.

It’s clear that in order to defend these national security interests, the Army will need to operate within a maritime environment. The Government has also identified a requirement for Army to undertake more extensive engagement with international counterparts in future. Shared perspectives, mutual understanding and interoperable forces developed during peacetime engagement considerably ease the difficulties of implementing any operating concept during a crisis. Since land forces dominate many regional militaries, Army is well positioned to shape and influence regional partners.

The ADF will also be able to work with regional partners, including by providing contributions such as an independent Joint Task Force or single-Service capabilities, in a geographic area that is vitally important to Australia’s national interest. The contribution by our men and women of the Australian Defence Force to international operations is nothing short of outstanding. This is why our Defence Force is held in high esteem around our region and around the world.

Australia is committed to enhancing mutual understanding and building trust with our international counterparts. Training exercises have helped strengthen these ties across the
spectrum of military operations from conventional conflict to peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance efforts. This also highlights the importance of inter-operability and emerging capabilities. In an increasingly uncertain world, this Government supports ADF participation in multi-national exercises and is determined to do what we can to keep our people safe and our country secure.

2. The challenges facing Army being able to deliver on the Government requirements

While this conference will discuss the future of the Army, during this Centenary of Anzac period, I would put it to you that the Army has been innovating and modernising and meeting the challenges laid down by Gov’t for 100 years.

Today’s all-volunteer Australian Army traces its origins to the First Australian Imperial Force, raised at the commencement of the First World War due to the provisions of the Defence Act 1903, which precluded sending conscripts overseas. The Australian Army’s identity is indelibly tied to the iconic battles of the First World War: Gallipoli, Beersheba, the Somme, Bullecourt, Messines, Ypres and many more. From the first, this force showed its ability to innovate and adapt. It had to. It had only just been formed, and it was thrown into a type of warfare that was hitherto unknown to mankind. And of course the most iconic example of this innovation and modernisation was in Lieutenant General John Monash’s pioneering use of combined arms in the 93 min offensive at Hamel and later Amiens.

By recognising the potential of new technologies, by devising clever strategies for their cooperation, and by his meticulous planning and preparation, Monash was able to achieve important victories against the Germans while minimising Australian and allied casualties. Hamel marked the first time in the history of warfare that infantry, tanks, aircraft and artillery had been used together as part of one integrated plan. This concept of combined arms now seems obvious, and is an important concept in our Defence doctrine and planning. In the words of Jonathan House, the pre-eminent historian of combined arms,

… the combined arms concept is the basic idea that different combat arms and weapons systems must be used in concert to maximise the survival and combat effectiveness of the others. The strengths of one system must be used to compensate for the weaknesses of others.

This is captured most succinctly in Australian doctrine in one of our principles of warfare, and in a single word: Cooperation.

And yet, while this is a basic tenet of our concept of warfare, and when Monash’s pioneering methods are now almost 100 years old, it is only quite recently that the Army organised its three multi-role combat brigades under Plan Beersheba. In this new structure, tanks, infantry and artillery are permanently organised in each Multirole Combat Brigade, retaining the structure that the Armoured Cavalry Regiment exercises annually at Exercise HAMEL. This structure will be vital in ensuring the future Army remains agile, effective and ready to deploy at short notice. It positions the Army for the considerable challenges ahead.

In the future, the Army will increasingly need to cooperate not only within combat teams, but also with the Navy and the Air Force, the broader Defence organisation, and with international partners. This will be in the context of increasing complexity and military modernisation in our region and in the context of a world that is less certain. Events continue to unfold in the Middle East, where we have eight of our 14 current operations, and we continue to monitor the situation
in the Ukraine. The overarching narrative is that it is in all our national interests to support and promote a rules-based international order.

In the past year in Iraq, for example, we have seen repeated reports of atrocities against civilians, minorities and the security-force opponents of Daesh. As the Prime Minister has said, Daesh’s activities in Syria and Iraq are a threat to regional and international security and it is important to do what we reasonably can to avert a potential genocide. Australia has a long and distinguished tradition of assisting people in need and this is one reason why Australia has joined international partners to disrupt and degrade Daesh. The Australian Government condemns the actions of Daesh, and sees the organisation as a threat to regional and international security.

Australia’s military contribution to the international coalition in Iraq responds to requests from the Government of Iraq and the US to contribute specific ADF capabilities to meet these threats head on. In addition to our original commitment of Australian aircraft and a Special Operations Task Group, the combined Australia-New Zealand Task Group Taji has now commenced training the 76th Iraqi Brigade as part of the Building Partner Capacity mission.

In Afghanistan, we still have around 400 personnel based in Afghanistan including advisers, support staff and force protection elements assigned to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy and the Special Operations Advisory Group based in Kabul. We also have personnel providing advisory support to the Afghan National Army’s 205 Corps Headquarters in Kandahar; and a continuation of embed staff roles within Headquarters under the International Security Assistance Force.

Closer to home, our region hosts some of the world’s most complex and longstanding disputes. Rapid and significant strategic shifts in the region have created ambiguity and uncertainty, fuelling tensions. Australia’s future prosperity will continue to be tied to the security and stability of our region. The Indo-Pacific has some of the fastest-growing economies in the world and the demand for defence technology to safeguard the region’s prosperity and security is ever increasing.

In a changing world, Army’s role is having to evolve. Technological advances are transforming the potential roles that the land force can play, and the ways it can be integrated with air and maritime forces. Advances in land-based long-range precision-strike systems (missiles, cruise missiles, UAV); littoral anti-ship capabilities; air defence capabilities; long-range artillery and rocket systems raise the potential for land forces to provide significant support to sea and air control operations. To give just a few examples:

- The employment of land-based ISR and strike from congested littoral environments in support of sea strike and sea denial;
- Land-based air and missile defence in support of a joint integrated air and missile defence plan; and
- The employment of land manoeuvre enabled by long-range air and sea force projection platforms to secure key airfields and ports and deny the enemy the ability to generate localised air defence or sea control effects.

Although we have seen excellent achievements from our Air Force in the Middle East, without land forces the defeat of a land based adversary is unachievable. A soldier with a rifle is still required to seize and hold ground. Army furthermore has a Maritime Role.
The increased possibilities raised by new technologies, combined with the imperatives of our changing strategic reality, mean the land force cannot be thought of in isolation from sea and air. The Australian Army will play an important role in our overall Defence strategy. Australia is a maritime nation with vital economic and strategic interests in a stable maritime region. 98 per cent of our international trade, by volume, travels by sea, so we have a clear and legitimate national interest in free and unencumbered transit through international waters.

For this reason, Australia has a clear interest in contributing to efforts that support free and unfettered access to the maritime and global commons, stability in the immediate, regional and global security environments and maintenance of the existing international rules-based global order. Our approach acknowledges the complex archipelagic nature of our near region and highlights the importance of the littoral environment for future operations by the Australian Defence Force.

3. How the Government will support the Army

Building a robust and prosperous economy and a safe and secure Australia is the Government’s number one priority. In this light, the Government is committed to maintaining a strong and capable Australian Defence Force. Strong Government investment in Defence is needed to ensure the men and women of the ADF have the capabilities they need to carry out their vital role of protecting Australia and its national interests. This is why we are delivering on our promise of no further cuts to the Defence budget, growing the Defence budget to two per cent of GDP within a decade and reinvesting any savings back into Defence.

This three part funding envelop is critical to allow Australia's defence forces to embark on a period of significant modernisation and acquisition projects. Investment by the Government will provide Defence with a stable and sustainable funding growth path, which was left unachievable by the previous Government. The investment the Government is making is monumental and requires careful planning to ensure that funding is appropriately prioritised and that growth is practicable.

That is why the Government has commenced a new White Paper and Force Structure Review and has delivered the First Principles Review of Defence. The Prime Minister will have more to say on these critically important reforms during his address today. Suffice to say the three part funding envelop, the fully costed WP15 and substantial departmental reform agenda is designed to allow our military to generate the combat power our nation and our Allies need.

For countries that can bring their different capabilities together to operate as a coordinated joint force will enjoy an advantage. In our increasingly interconnected world, it is essential the Army is able operate seamlessly in coalition with other nations, and even lead coalitions. For Australia, this will be achieved through greater investment in enabling capabilities – including information and communications technology, the Defence estate, science and technology, and our Defence workforce – the glue that binds front-line capabilities together to maximise the effectiveness of the force.

The Government is developing a plan for a potent and capable ADF and from an Army perspective this will involve major new acquisitions. A stronger, more versatile and adaptable land force is needed to keep pace with changes in technology and the character of war itself. In 2014, the Government gave first pass approval to Army’s project to replace its armoured fighting vehicles under the LAND 400 program. This is a critical component of Army’s future force and the government is committed to ensuring forces deployed in the national interest are the best equipped and able to survive within an increasingly lethal environment.
The LAND 400 program is the Australian Army’s largest, most comprehensive and enduring combat vehicle program and will provide Army with an essential capability for future land operations. It will acquire deployable armoured fighting vehicles to provide improved precision firepower, high levels of survivability and tactical mobility compared to existing systems. I want to see Australian industry opportunities maximised under this important project. The scope of the LAND 400 Program will be considered by Government in the not too distant future.

The new vehicles will replace our in-service armoured personnel carriers, the Australian-Light Armoured Vehicles and armoured personnel carriers that have insufficient protection for emerging and future threats. The Australian Government has also awarded a contract to Supacat Ltd valued at more than $130 million to provide specialised vehicles for the Australian Defence Force’s Special Forces. The acquisition of these vehicles will enhance our Special Forces’ ability to maintain a capability edge over emerging threats to Australia’s national interests. This project will provide significant opportunities to Australian industry during the production, integration and through-life support phases.

These are modern, highly mobile vehicles that can be re-configured to suit the individual mission and the communications on board will provide digital connectivity across the Australian Defence Force as well as Coalition partners. Approval has also been given to enter into a number of contracts for the provision of support vehicles, as well as various communication and networking systems that will make up a communications capability and provide additional opportunities for Australian industry.

Another step towards continued enhancement and modernisation of the ADF is the new and improved personal protective equipment set to be rolled out to more than 20,000 Australian Defence Force personnel over the next several years. Last year, the first of the Land 125 Phase 3B contracts was awarded. The $170 million upgrade to our soldiers’ kit will significantly enhance the capability of ADF personnel deployed on military operations. It will increase soldier mobility and endurance through the acquisition of lighter and better-integrated components and materiel. The protective equipment includes new-generation body armour, combat helmets, hearing protection, and ballistic glasses and goggles.

This project, which will improve a soldier’s individual load carriage equipment, draws on the direct experience and feedback derived from 15 years of ADF combat operations. I am proud to say it is Australian industry that will be delivering this capability, with Bendigo-based Australian Defence Apparel set to supply load carriage equipment, including ballistic plate carriers, packs, basic pouches and equipment bags. I am committed, as is this whole Government, to supporting Australian industry. I want to work with companies to provide consistency, continuity and a long-term focus for the purchase and sustainment of defence capabilities.

As the ADF modernises, Defence continues to look to industry to bring innovation to capability, sustainment and survivability to our war fighters. The defence industry has long been a source of great innovation, and there is no monopoly on good ideas. Our industry and research community is integral to promoting, harnessing and translating innovative ideas into practical capability.

The Defence Science and Technology Organisation has a particularly important role to play here, in collaboration with partners both in Australia and overseas. As a small Defence Force we cannot hope to have a decisive effect in operations by weight of combat numbers. It is because we are small that we must think smarter. The focus is now on the sharp end of defence business: enhanced vehicle and body armour; threat detection; power supply and management systems for soldiers’ combat equipment; enhanced command and control systems; new logistics and maintenance thinking and world-class training capabilities.
To achieve a capable and sustainable future ADF, Defence must become a more integrated organisation. The Defence workforce must continue to become a more accountable, professional and talented workforce. And it must utilise the support of contractors and industry in achieving these objectives. Out to 2035, the Government is building a more potent and capable ADF that will require personnel with new and different skills. The Government expects Defence to play a more active role in contributing to regional security and stability and make meaningful contributions to coalition operations across the world, because our interests are engaged globally.

In a market like Australia’s, we should not be constraining ourselves to a subset of the talent pool. Defence needs to draw upon the full range of skills, expertise and experience of the Australian workforce. To achieve this, Defence must increase its appeal to a more diverse workforce and must introduce degrees of flexibility into its workforce offering as these will be critical to Defence’s, and the Army’s, future capability.

Defence must deepen and expand it’s cultural and linguistic expertise to generate an organisation that is better able to operate internationally and engage with a broad range of partners. Defence already has a strong base of language skills to build on. We now need to expand our cultural and linguistic expertise to make these skills more common across the entire ADF and Defence organisation.

We are not there yet. Within our 57,416 strong permanent ADF, only 3,328 members identify themselves as being from a non-English speaking background. 12.6 per cent of the ADF, or 7,208 members of the permanent force, were born outside of Australia. But perhaps more critically, only 5.5 per cent, or 3,182, were born in countries other than Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom. Yet 26 per cent of our nation was born overseas and when you add in one or more parent, the number is 46 per cent. Indeed 20 per cent of Australian homes do not speak English at home. Yet only 5.5 per cent of our organisation reflects this national norm. Our organisation looks like me. We can and will do more to bring these figures into alignment with the diversity of the broader Australian community. This is not for any social engineering or feel good factor, it is to generate combat power.

We will need a workforce that is more highly educated in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) skills and the reality is that these skills are predominantly the education domain of recent migrants. 90 per cent of students studying mathematics at Melbourne University do not look like me. 75 per cent of students studying engineering at RMIT do not look like me. A more diverse Defence workforce is about ensuring we have the workforce needed for the future, in the same vein as it ensures our defence force more accurately reflects our national character.

We are also rethinking the traditional notion of the ‘ideal worker’, one who renders unrestricted and uninterrupted service. As our society changes, this can be a barrier to Defence attracting and retaining both men and women, and to utilising the full range of skills in our Regular and Reserve force. Finding better ways to attract talented workers in the contemporary workforce market, to retain them, and to utilise the full range of their skills, will be crucial to Army’s future capability.

In closing, it’s true that social, technological and strategic change mean challenges for the Australian Army. But the Army is postured well for these changes and is on a path to enhance and adapt its structure, culture and way of doing business into the future.
The Australian Government is committed to supporting Defence, and the Army in these changing times. There can be no greater duty for Government than to secure the future security of our nation. The work of ASPI and the people at this conference will also be vital to driving and leading these changes in the interests of our national security.

Thank you.

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