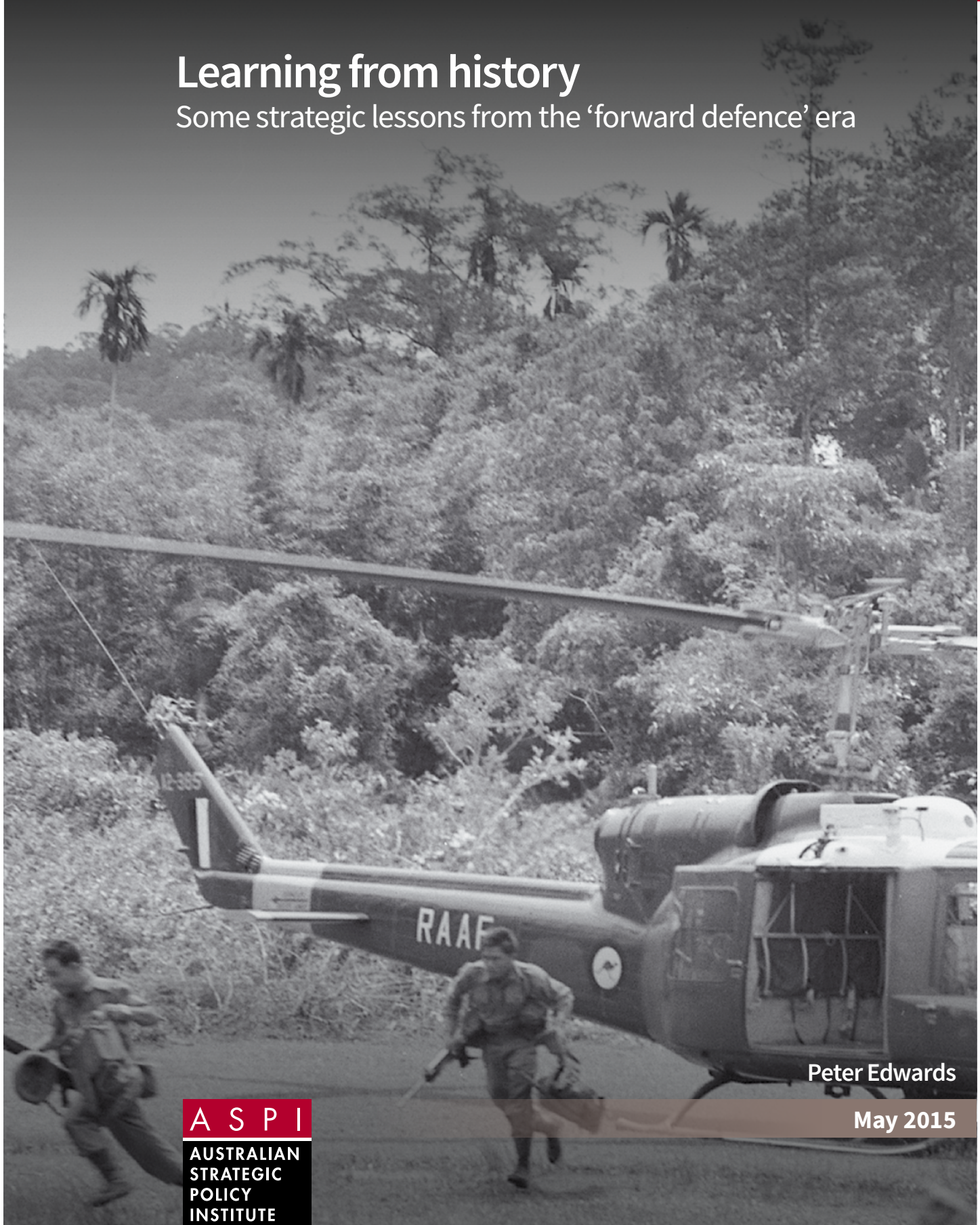


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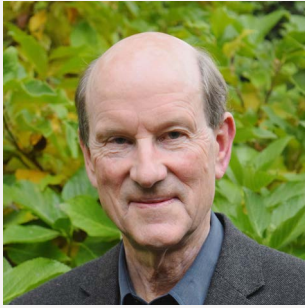
Some strategic lessons from the 'forward defence' era



Peter Edwards

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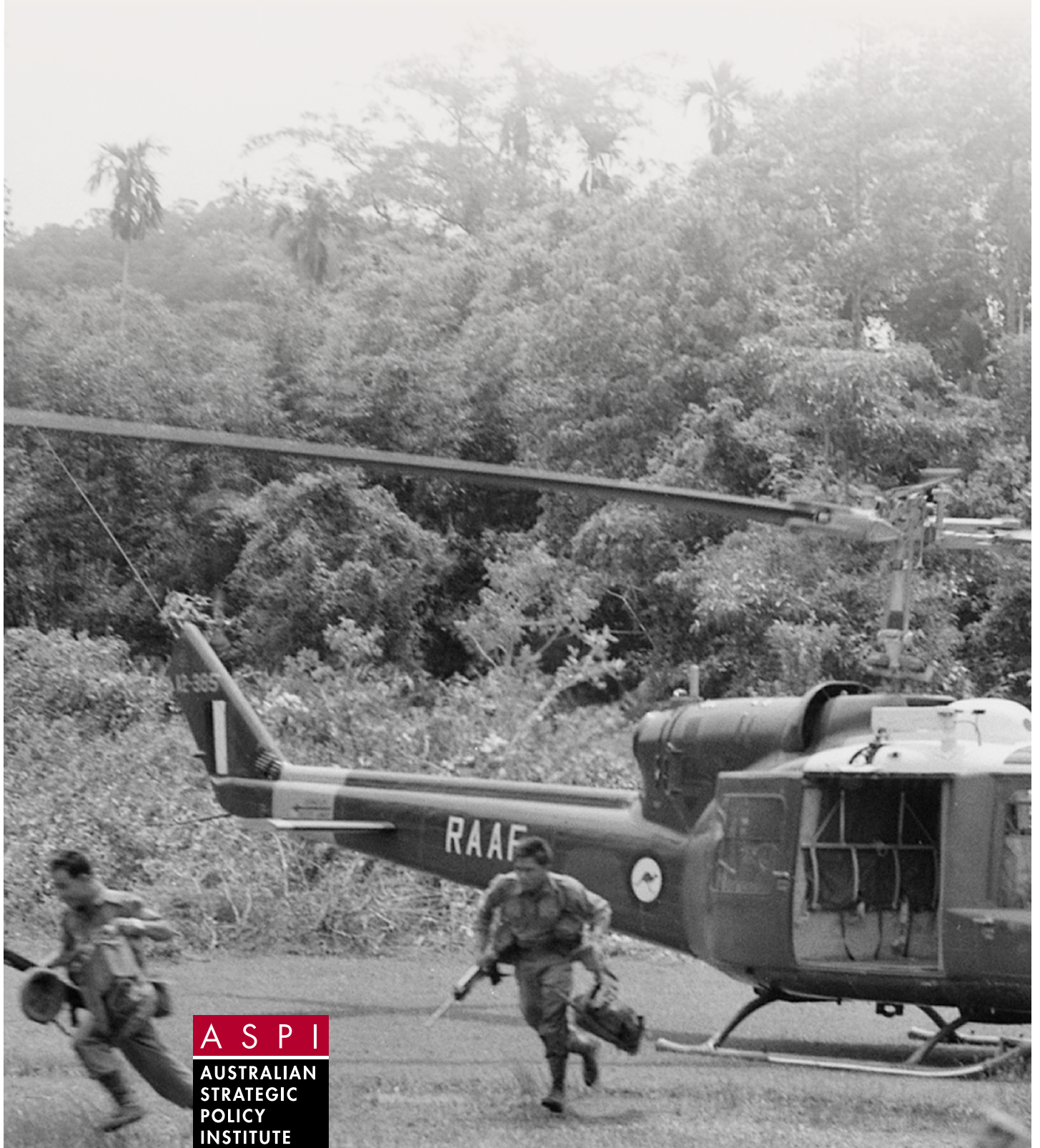
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Learning from history

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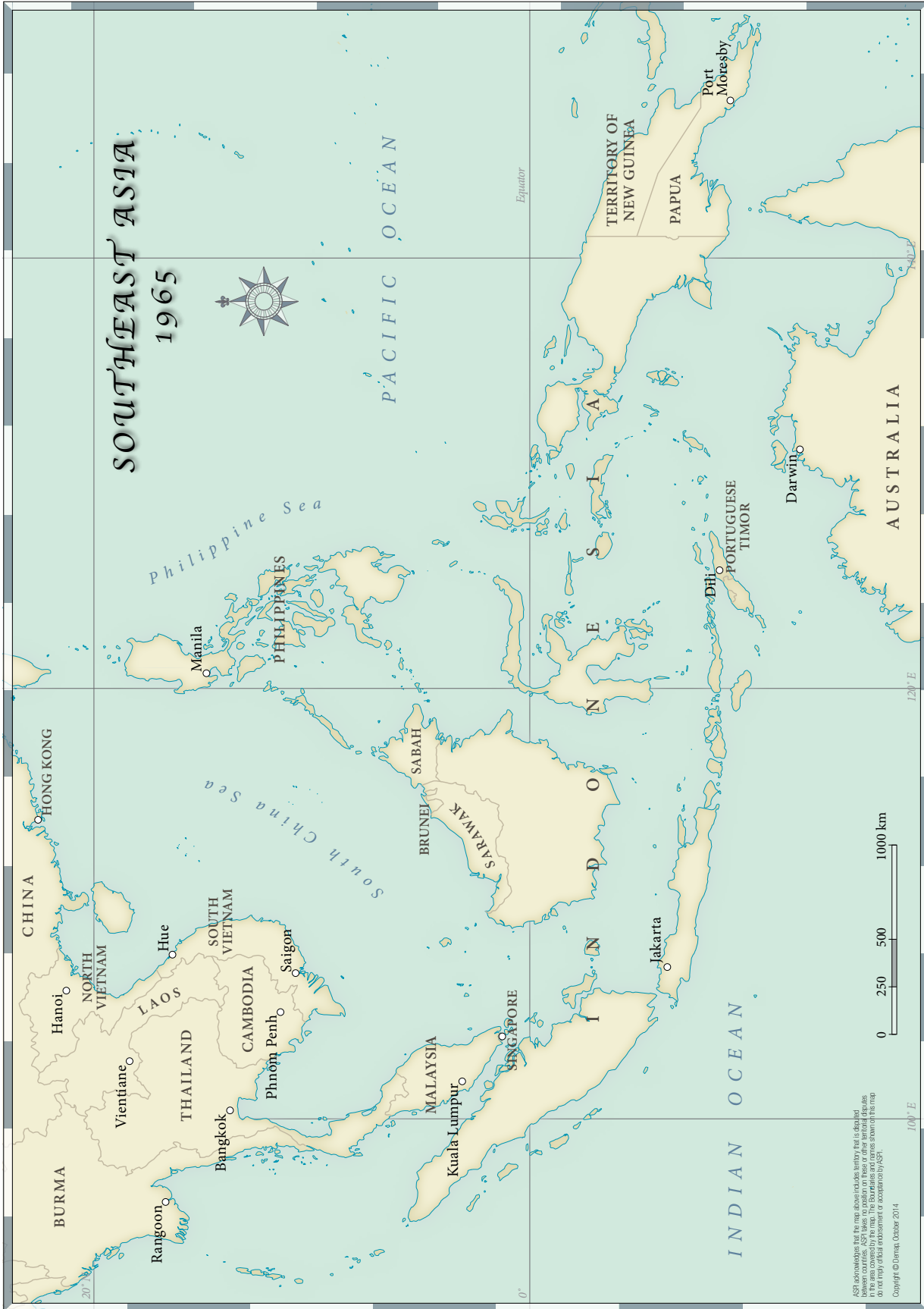
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INTRODUCTION

Like many of our friends and allies, Australia is currently engaged in a major reassessment of its strategic policy. Those in and around the policymaking process are trying to define the nation's core values and interests, to identify the most likely threats to those values and interests, and to frame a strategy that will best protect and promote our national security. This is happening at a time when many defence budgets are severely constrained. While the public hopes for a 'peace dividend' following a period of substantial military activity, governments are obliged to reassert control of their budgets and reinvigorate their national economies. A period of postwar economic austerity would seem to be the worst time to prepare a long-term national security strategy.

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, American diplomatic historian Melvyn Leffler turned this familiar dilemma on its head (Leffler 2013). Periods of postwar austerity and drastic cuts in military spending, according to him, have been good for American strategy, 'forcing Washington to think strategically, something it rarely does when times are flush'. Austerity, he said, brings out 'the importance of having a coherent strategic concept, a clear assessment of threats, a precise delineation of interests and goals, and a calibrated sense of priorities'. It also forces leaders to coordinate their military and diplomatic assets, and to strike an appropriate balance between resources and commitments. Looking at the past hundred years of American strategy, Leffler argued that problems and errors arose less from tight budgets than from clinging too long to outdated strategic ideas and capabilities, under the influence of bureaucratic and domestic politics.

This paper takes a similar approach to Australian strategic thinking. The strategic calculations of a regional middle power are in some respects similar to those of a global superpower, but in others decidedly different from them. The fiscal circumstances are different, and not just because the Australian defence budget is a mere fraction of the American. In recent years, Australian governments of both political persuasions have set a goal of 2% of GDP for defence, but it remains to be seen whether that can be achieved. But questions about the allocation of roles and resources between the military, diplomatic, intelligence and other agencies have some common themes. As a lively debate in the ASPI blog, *The Strategist*, recently demonstrated, there's much discussion about the nature and meaning of strategy, and where strategic planning's to be found in the governmental structure. Does the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 'do strategy', or is strategy the exclusive territory of the Department of Defence? Moreover, some of Australia's problems may have come not only from clinging too long to outdated ideas, but also from discarding some that are still relevant—perhaps we've thrown out some strategic babies with the bathwater.

Chapter 1 of this paper places our current position in the history of the major phases of Australian strategic policy since Federation. It then examines one of those phases—the years from about 1950 to 1975, when Australia's strategic concept (to use Leffler's term) was often summarised as 'forward defence'. It outlines the main elements—what Hillary Clinton recently called the 'organising principles'¹—of that strategy. The next three chapters assess the way those principles were implemented, with particular attention to the way the Australian Government handled commitments to three conflicts in Southeast Asia. Chapter 2 comments on Australian policymaking during the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960, Chapter 3 addresses policies during the Indonesian Confrontation from 1963 to 1966, and Chapter 4 comments on the Australian commitment to the Vietnam War, in which our service personnel were involved from 1962 to 1972. Finally, Chapter 5 draws some lessons from the forward defence era that remain applicable to our current challenges.

CHAPTER 1

Forward defence

In Australian strategic thinking, the present time can best be seen as the start of the fifth major cycle since Federation. Each cycle started after a major war or period of military activity, as the country's leaders reassessed our place in the world, and especially our potential military commitments. The first came after the South African War (or Boer War) of 1899–1902, which overlapped Federation; the second followed the First World War of 1914–18; the third began in the late 1940s, after the Second World War; the fourth followed the end of the Vietnam War in 1975; the current cycle follows an extended period of active operational engagement, from the East Timor crisis of 1999 to the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2013.

In each case, while the public looked for a peace dividend that would shift public expenditure away from military demands towards the economic and welfare requirements of peacetime, Australian governments sought to define something like what the British call a grand strategy and the Americans a national strategy: a concept of the nation's place in the world, which provides a framework for its external engagement, in peace and war, for the foreseeable future. Military strategy is an important part, but only a part, of a grand strategy, which ideally should give a coherent summary of the way a nation intends to develop and deploy all its hard and soft power assets—including its diplomatic, trade, aid, intelligence, cultural and other resources, as well as its armed forces.

Alliances versus going it alone

For any nation-state, this involves assessing threats and opportunities, balancing resources and commitments, and defining roles for the armed services and various civilian agencies. For Australia, it also involves balancing two fundamental approaches that have long competed for supremacy in shaping Australia's strategic outlook. The first starts from the premise that Australia has a small population and limited resources, but has to defend an entire continent and interests that extend far afield, in a volatile, potentially hostile, part of the world. Consequently, Australian security demands that we maintain the closest possible relationship with at least one major ally, with which we share many common interests and values, even a sense of identity, and which possesses the military power to defend not only our shared interests but also the sort of international order in which Australia and like-minded nations can flourish. For many years, that ally was Britain; for the past half-century or more, it's been the US. Historically, we've been willing to pay our dues, in blood and treasure, to ensure the health of our relationship with our great-power allies. As Allan Gyngell (2014:382) recently put it, 'the insurance premium is the most powerful metaphor in Australian international policy.'

In constant contest with this idea is the rival view that Australia should place independence ahead of alliance as our highest ideal in international affairs. Advocates of this view assert that excessive dependence on allies leads us into 'other people's wars'; that we can't rely on distant allies in the northern hemisphere, who'll always place their own national interests ahead of those of small countries down here, no matter how promptly we've paid our insurance premiums; and that we should instead concentrate on making as many friends, and as few enemies, as possible

in our own region. The latest round in this debate has been sparked by Malcolm Fraser's book, *Dangerous allies* (Fraser 2014), but the argument is far from new. It can be traced back at least as far as to the 1850s, when the colonial authorities established Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour and other coastal defences at the time of the Crimean War.

A look at Australia's history suggests that there'll always be advocates for each of those views. For their part, most governments will assert that their policies are designed to ensure that there's no conflict. They like to assure the public that, under their management, Australia's alliances strengthen our regional relationships, and *vice versa*. John Howard said that we didn't have to choose between our history and our geography; Kevin Rudd said that we could walk and chew gum at the same time. To quote Allan Gyngell again, Australians now expect their governments to manage the alliance with the US, to sustain positive relationships with major Asian countries, and to preserve Australia's place in a rules-based international order (2014:382).

To achieve this resolution, Australian governments have usually taken a number of steps. One is to seek, from our principal ally or group of allies, not only an assurance of support in our hour of need, but also access to the 'top table' of decision-making, so that our leaders have a voice in where, when and how our forces are used. Every significant Australian prime minister from Alfred Deakin to John Howard pursued that goal. They also sought to assure the public that Australian strategy would give priority to threats in our immediate region. They'd fight far from home only if that were clearly in our national interests. Such commitments usually meant fighting in areas around the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which were clearly important in the global balance of power as well as to Australia's communications with Britain and Europe. Australian forces were seldom committed to more distant regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America.

The Cold War produces the strategy

Let's now turn to the third of the strategic cycles identified above. In the early 1950s, as the world adjusted to the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, the Australian Government adopted a strategic concept often summarised as 'forward defence'. A generation later, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, that concept was seen as deeply flawed. In the post-1975 reaction against anything associated with the humiliation in Vietnam, forward defence was discredited, together with the domino theory, the American alliance, the Anzac tradition, and much else. Australia's national security policy, it was alleged, had been reduced to the crudely simplistic idea that 'we must fight them up there before we have to fight them down here'. Forward defence allegedly portrayed the enemy in racist as well as ideological terms—a combination of the Red Peril and the Yellow Peril. Critics alleged that it committed Australia to fight in a profoundly unwise, even immoral, war alongside the US as an expression of obsequious subservience to our great-power ally. To this day, Australian political and military leaders are careful to dissociate themselves from forward defence, especially when expressing support for the American alliance.

When carefully implemented, forward defence was an appropriate strategic concept for the times.

A more careful analysis of Australia's defence and foreign policies between 1950 and 1975 indicates that there's a large element of caricature in that portrayal (although some of its supporters didn't help during the 1966 election campaign, when posters portrayed threatening arrows emerging from China and pointing at Australia, evoking memories of Japan's southward thrust in 1942). When carefully implemented, forward defence was an appropriate strategic concept for the times. It met many of the criteria for a well-balanced national strategy—or even a modest grand strategy, however oxymoronic that sounds.

This assessment is based on a study of what the Australian Government of the day said and did—and what it sometimes did *not* say or do—during the third quarter of the 20th century.² From that analysis, the following emerge as the major elements of forward defence.

Only in our region

First, and most importantly, Australia would commit military forces only in our immediate region, which (after the Korean War) meant Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding the reverence accorded to Gallipoli, and the fresh memories of Tobruk and Alamein, the Menzies government explicitly ruled out a return to the Middle East – Mediterranean theatre. This was no light decision. The political and military leaders of our then major ally, Britain, indicated that if there were a Third World War against the Soviet Union—a well-founded fear, at least until Stalin's death in 1953—they'd welcome an Australian return to the strategically vital areas around the Suez Canal and the Arabian oilfields. Australia made gestures in that direction, while the government decided where its principal interests were located. For a time, two RAAF squadrons were based in Malta and took part in NATO exercises. But from 1953, Australia insisted that its military commitments would only be in what Menzies had much earlier called the 'near north'.

Only with great and powerful friends

Second, Australian forces would only be committed alongside the forces of the US, Britain or, preferably, both. Like most Australians who had experienced the Second World War, Menzies had an acute sense of vulnerability to threats from the north, and a firm belief that only the might of the Americans, and to a lesser extent their British and European allies, had saved Australia from an ignominious fate. Anything approaching an independent or self-reliant stance in defence was, in the minds of Menzies and his colleagues, simply beyond Australia's resources.

Menzies famously spoke of Australia's need for, and gratitude to, 'great and powerful friends'. Note the plural 'friends'. It was not, as often asserted, a simple matter of turning away from Britain towards the US. Britain still had substantial interests and responsibilities in Southeast Asia, and extensive forces to protect them. Menzies didn't want Australia, and other Western countries, to have to rely solely on the US for their security. Helping Britain to restore its economic and military strength, and thereby justify its place at the top table of world powers, was therefore in Australia's own interests. This would be done even at the risk of offending American sensitivities. Making Australian territory, at Maralinga and elsewhere, available for British nuclear tests in the 1950s was one step towards the restoration of Britain's global power and prestige—qualities that Menzies saw as protecting Australia's interests both in the region and in the global order.

Like many Australians of his time, Menzies assumed that Australia's security was based in large measure on European dominance of most of Southeast Asia.

Like many Australians of his time, Menzies assumed that Australia's security was based in large measure on European dominance of most of Southeast Asia. The rapid post-1945 decolonisation of the European empires in Asia and Africa, especially in Southeast Asia, discomfited him. But the departure of the Dutch from the Netherlands East Indies (apart from West New Guinea) in 1949 and of the French from Indochina in 1954 only made Menzies all the more determined to do whatever he could to retain British and American power in the region. Menzies and his colleagues deployed Australia's assets—military, diplomatic, geographic, even Menzies' own prestige and oratorical skill—towards the goal of keeping both Britain and the US committed to the security of the Southeast Asian region, a part of the world that ranked far higher in Australia's strategic priorities than in those of either of the northern hemisphere powers.

Preferably in multilateral coalitions

Third, while the forward defence strategy was always focused principally on cooperation with the US and Britain, the Australian Government had a strong preference for fighting in a large coalition that included other diplomatically respectable partners. In this respect, as in many others, the Korean War created the template that Australia sought to follow in its Southeast Asian commitments. In Korea, Australia fought as part of a 16-nation coalition. The US provided the military leadership and a major part of the combat forces and logistic support, but other nations made substantial commitments. Australia contributed forces from all three armed services, and Australian and British infantry battalions were combined in a Commonwealth brigade. This was later replaced by another Commonwealth brigade, combining British, Australian, New Zealand and Indian units. During the war, the Commonwealth brigade was linked with British and Canadian brigades to form a Commonwealth division.

Australians were always more comfortable fighting alongside their longstanding Commonwealth allies, especially the British and New Zealanders. Their tactics, doctrines, equipment and military jargon were more familiar and congenial than those of the Americans. And the Commonwealth structure gave the Australians greater opportunity for command experience than would have been possible when linked solely with American forces. After the government committed a second battalion to Korea, Australian brigadiers commanded the Commonwealth brigade, in which the Australians had the preponderance of forces.

Fighting as part of a broad coalition supported the argument that Australia was fighting for democratic values against communist aggression, rather than lending support to American imperialism. While the Australian Government devoted considerable effort to ensure that its policies were coordinated with the US, Britain and New Zealand, it was sensitive to the American assertion that they must not give the impression that a ‘white man’s club’ was trying to dictate the future of an Asian region. Consequently, Australia wanted to have its military commitments endorsed by a large, multiracial international organisation. The Korean War had the best possible imprimatur, being fought under the aegis of the United Nations. Where UN endorsement wasn’t possible, the Australians looked to the Commonwealth or an organisation such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), of which more below.

Another element in the Australian preference for a multilateral, coalition environment was often in the minds of Australian policymakers, although seldom made public. It might be called ‘the MacArthur factor’, as it was based largely on the Australian experience of operating under the overall command of General Douglas MacArthur, first during the Pacific campaigns of the Second World War and more especially in Korea. The Australians feared that reliance on the enormous military strength of the US carried with it the risk of an American military commander who would take unnecessary risks, possibly even precipitating a nuclear conflict with China. The Menzies government had, albeit discreetly, shared the very public concern of the British Government over General MacArthur’s speculation about the use of nuclear weapons in Korea and his ‘push to the Yalu’, which had prompted Chinese intervention in the war. In Australian policymaking circles, many hoped that a large international coalition, preferably including Britain, would help to ensure that American military might was deployed effectively but with restraint.

For all these reasons, the Australian Government welcomed the creation of SEATO following the Geneva Conference of 1954, which divided Vietnam into a communist north and a non-communist south. SEATO’s members were the US, the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines. It seemed to meet many of Australia’s criteria for a desirable framework within which to operate in Southeast Asia. On the face of it, SEATO linked distant powers with local nations; it committed the military might of the US, Britain and France to the defence of the weak, non-communist nations of postcolonial Southeast Asia; it placed American military strength and leadership within a multilateral coalition environment, with the prospect of benefiting from British experience and the local knowledge of the Thais and Filipinos; it indicated that the Thais had replaced their traditional inclination to bend with the prevailing wind with a determination to offer strong resistance to communist expansion; it committed the member nations to link their military planning for the region; and it offered the prospect of securing one of Australia’s longstanding goals—access to American military and political plans in their formative stages. It was significant, for

example, that John Wilton's last position before his long-anticipated appointment as the Australian Army's chief was as head of the SEATO Military Planning Office in Bangkok (see Horner 2005).

For some years, the Australian Government gave greater prominence to SEATO than it did to ANZUS. For example, it gave considerable publicity to meetings of SEATO's political and military bodies in the late 1950s, when Canberra was becoming increasingly concerned about the direction of American policy over Australia's major concern in the region—Indonesia's claim to West New Guinea. In the early 1960s, Australia continued to cling to SEATO as the supposed framework for Western involvement in Indochina, even as the organisation's profound flaws became increasingly obvious. The French clearly had no desire to return to Indochina after the humiliation of Dien Bien Phu, and were now proposing the 'neutralisation' of Southeast Asia. The British had backed away from their earlier support of the domino theory, and no longer regarded the conflict in Vietnam as directly affecting the security of their responsibilities on the Malayan peninsula and the island of Borneo. SEATO had thus become little more than an American–Thai–Australian alliance, and the Americans retained their traditional reluctance to share their plans with their allies. Nevertheless, the appeal of a broad multinational coalition was such that the Australian Government, in the critical period of late 1964 and early 1965, continued to argue that its commitment to Vietnam was consistent with, and 'flowed from', its SEATO obligations, when that was an increasingly transparent veneer.

Talk a good war, but limit the commitment

Fourth, the determination of the Menzies government to do all it could to retain British and American power in the region didn't mean that military contributions were easily volunteered. More commonly, they were used as bargaining chips—conceded reluctantly, in response to considerable pressure, on the understanding that their military significance was less important than their diplomatic value. While the critics of Australian foreign policy for the past hundred years have alleged that Australia has been only too willing to commit forces to 'other people's wars', the view from London and Washington, since 1945, has often been that Australians 'talk a good war': the strength of the political and diplomatic support for our allies hasn't always been matched by the number of boots on the ground.

The nature of Australia's military commitments overseas changed radically after 1945. No longer would there be the dispatch of hundreds of thousands of Australians to follow those of the First and Second AIF of the two world wars, and their compatriots in the RAN and RAAF. A huge, but often underestimated, change in Australia's way of making war took place in 1948, when for the first time we established a standing army, instead of relying on the recruitment of volunteers who would serve 'for the duration'. The 'teeth arm' (in the jarring military phrase) of the standing army—the infantry—was designated the Royal Australian Regiment, created by designating the three battalions which served in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan as the regiment's First, Second and Third Battalions (1RAR, 2RAR and 3RAR).

From the Korean War onwards, our contribution to overseas conflicts would no longer be 'all in', as in the two world wars, but would be carefully graduated according to the political climate, both in Australia and internationally. Australia's initial responses to requests for support generally included less politically sensitive elements, such as transport aircraft from the RAAF or RAN vessels to be used to intercept supplies to insurgents. After that, RAAF or RAN combat units, or both, might be deployed, or Army units that were, in theory at least, less likely to be involved in direct combat, such as advisory teams or engineers. The crucial and potentially controversial final step, both politically and militarily, was the decision to commit one or more battalions of the RAR, often associated with small but highly trained and effective elements of the Special Air Service (SAS).

Finally, in the undeclared wars of the post-1945 era, Australian forces wouldn't take part in an invasion, but would only operate in another country with the explicit consent, and preferably at the invitation, of the local government: hence the importance attached to the famous 'request' from Saigon for the commitment in Vietnam. We wouldn't make commitments in order to effect 'regime change' where communists or their allies had gained power, but those we did make were designed to support the established order and to prevent communists from making further gains.

Even at the height of the Vietnam War, Canberra, like Washington, rejected any notion of invading North Vietnam and removing the regime in Hanoi. The war was intended to defend the regime in the south, not to overturn its rival in the north.

A strategy for the times, until times changed

Taken together, these elements established a strategy that was a reasonable response to the geopolitical circumstances. It focused Australian attention on one region of the world, Southeast Asia, where the combination of the decolonisation of the European empires and the Cold War was creating a volatile political cauldron, disturbingly close to Australia's shores. The Australian Government determined that the national interest would best be served by opposing communist or pro-communist movements, while assisting anticommunist nationalists to establish and maintain control. Towards that end, the forward defence strategy balanced alliance and regional relationships by stating that Australia's military commitments would be only in Southeast Asia, and only alongside our great power allies. It also balanced commitments and resources. The insistence on fighting only alongside the US, Britain, or both, and the caution with which commitments were made, kept defence expenditure down. After the heavy costs of the Korean War, the government placed an absolute ceiling on defence expenditure, about £200 million per year, which represented a declining proportion of GDP as the economy grew in the postwar boom. The government was able to allocate resources towards 'national development' rather than defence, notwithstanding occasional complaints from London and Washington that Australia wasn't carrying its share of the defence burden.

In 1959, cabinet's principal defence advisers, both civilian and uniformed, urged the government to give the armed forces a greater capacity 'to act independently of Allies'. Cabinet firmly rejected this advice, stating that Australia's 'limited population and resources' couldn't sustain 'self-supporting Forces'. It evidently feared that a greater measure of self-reliance in defence would be inordinately costly, and that the public might see it as displaying a lack of faith in our allies. Instead, we would continue to rely on supporting our allies in collective arrangements such as SEATO and ANZUS. The Australian Government would continue to 'talk a good war', loudly proclaiming its support for British and American policies in Southeast Asia, while insisting that it didn't have the resources to make large commitments, and carefully limiting the military and political costs of the commitments it did make.

Both the positive and the negative results of military commitments in this period arose not so much from the overall strategy but from the statecraft with which it was applied.

Both the positive and the negative results of military commitments in this period arose not so much from the overall strategy but from the statecraft with which it was applied. The following chapters examine the three military commitments that Australia made under the rubric of forward defence. They pay particular attention to three elements:

- Australia's handling of its relations with the principal ally or allies involved, especially in shaping the size and duration of the commitment and the definition of the role and operational methods of the Australian forces committed
- the balance between military action and diplomacy, especially in regional capitals
- the relationship between the government's external policies and domestic party politics.

CHAPTER 2

The Malayan Emergency

In 1948, the British colonial authorities declared a state of emergency to combat a communist-led insurgency in their territories on and around the Malayan peninsula, giving the name 'Malayan Emergency' to what became a 12-year conflict. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) government led by Ben Chifley gave them no military assistance. Although generally sympathetic to Britain's Labour government, Chifley was reluctant to support Britain's return to Malaya, seeing the insurgency as primarily a legitimate rebellion by exploited workers. He and his principal advisers saw the Malayan rebellion as akin to the revolution in Indonesia, where Australian diplomacy had played an important role in helping the nationalists to gain independence from the Dutch.

The Liberal–Country Party coalition government led by Robert Menzies, elected in December 1949, was widely expected to take a different view, given Menzies' outspokenly pro-British and anticommunist views. Certainly, he soon faced pressure, both from London and from media commentators in Australia, to give significant support to the British authorities, on the grounds that Malaya was a major battleground in the Cold War between democracy and communism. The striking aspect of Menzies' response to this pressure, in the first year of his long postwar prime ministership, was its caution. He and his cabinet colleagues went to considerable lengths to demonstrate that, while they were determined to fight international communism, they had no wish to prejudice their relationship with genuine (that is, non-communist) nationalists in Southeast Asia; and they didn't necessarily accept British political and military assessments.

The Menzies government invited senior British officials to visit Australia, where they made their case to opposition as well as government politicians and to the wider community. Menzies also dispatched a substantial and well-qualified military mission to Malaya, including several rising stars of the three armed services. Their task was to make an independent assessment of all aspects of the British campaign against the insurgents. They were also expected to give advice to the British authorities, based on the widespread assumption that our military had gained considerable expertise in jungle warfare during the New Guinea campaigns from 1942 to 1945. In discussions in Malaya, London and Australia, Australian political and military leaders questioned British tactics, especially the use of bombers and conventional infantry forces. They expressed severe doubts about the value and relevance of bombing in a counterinsurgency campaign in Southeast Asian jungles. Some Australian politicians favoured what one called 'the dirt boys stuff'—the unorthodox techniques used by what are today known as special forces, such as the Special Operations Executive, during the world war.

The upshot of extensive discussions and debate was that Australia dispatched an RAAF squadron of Dakota transport aircraft, whose contribution was valuable but neither glamorous nor highly sensitive in domestic or international politics. Another RAAF squadron of Lincoln bombers was also sent, but only after persistent pressure from the British and extensive questioning by the Australians. The commitment was prompted by the unexpected outbreak of the Korean War. This, the government decided, was another theatre in the global Cold War, and it could

best show its support for the Western cause by committing the bombers to serve in Malaya. Fighting alongside its traditional Commonwealth allies once again offered opportunities for command experience: for two years, an RAAF officer commanded all RAF and RAAF units operating in Malaya.

Notwithstanding his strong pro-British and anticommunist views, Menzies showed no inclination to send infantry battalions to Malaya in 1950, even before any such commitment was rendered impossible by the requirement to send two battalions to Korea. By the time Australian troops were sent to Malaya in 1955—the first Australian troops to be sent overseas in peacetime—the circumstances had greatly changed. The tide of the campaign had reversed: after their early successes, the communist insurgents were now a small and declining force. The British had introduced a number of tactical innovations, which were so successful that they would come to be regarded as a template for the conduct of counterinsurgency. In the late 1950s, Australian troops were involved in what their official historian has described as ‘a long, frustrating and occasionally bloody clean-up operation’ (Peter Dennis in Grey and Dennis 1996). The Australians operated closely with British and other Commonwealth forces, using tactics in which they had full confidence and which exposed them to a low rate of battle casualties.

The international context was also largely consistent with Australian preferences. The troops were committed as part of the Australian contribution to the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve. Unlike the Americans, the British wished to have a ‘force-in-being’ located in the region. The Australian Government was happy to contribute elements from all three services to the Strategic Reserve. This was entirely consistent with the policy of using small Australian commitments to encourage Britain to remain committed, within the multinational Commonwealth context, to the military defence of Southeast Asia. It was happy to have the troops involved in counterterrorist operations, but didn’t want them to be drawn into dealing with communal tensions in Malaya or left-wing riots in Singapore.

Malaya was moving towards independence, and the emerging Malay leadership welcomed the presence of the Commonwealth troops and their contribution to the campaign against the ‘communist terrorists’, as the insurgents were termed. They did not, however, want the Australian troops to be linked to the broader anticommunist goals of SEATO. Any suggestion of association with SEATO was even more sensitive in Singapore, which was moving separately towards independence and where left-wing forces were powerful. Intense diplomacy was required before the Australian Government could arrive at a formula that satisfied it, the British authorities (in London and in the region), and the local Malayan and Singaporean leaders. The ‘primary role’ of the Australian troops, it was announced, was to deter communist aggression in Southeast Asia as part of the Strategic Reserve; their ‘secondary role’ was to take part in counterterrorist operations in Malaya. The troops were deployed in ways that made it clear that they wouldn’t take part in suppressing left-wing riots in Singapore or communal violence in Malaya.

The Malayan Emergency proved to be an important test of Australian statecraft in the post-1945 era.

The Malayan Emergency proved to be an important test of Australian statecraft in the post-1945 era. Australian political, diplomatic and military leaders worked hard to secure their strategic goals, engaging effectively with both their principal ally and the local nationalists. When Malaya gained its independence in 1957, the new government, elected with clear popular support, invited the Australians and other Commonwealth forces to stay and to continue their anti-terrorist operations. They were also asked to remain in the region after the emergency was finally declared over in 1960.

The experience of the Malayan Emergency had a lasting effect on Australian political and military leaders. The Army grew confident that Australian soldiers, especially the RAR and SAS, had become skilled in counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia, especially when working with British and Commonwealth allies. Political leaders, not least Menzies, drew the lesson that Western powers could intervene successfully in a former colony, at the request of the postcolonial leadership, to ensure that the new nation would be pro-Western and anticommunist.

The dispatch of Australian troops to Malaya in 1955, although limited and constrained in many ways, aroused considerable controversy within Australia. It happened to coincide with a deep and damaging split in the ALP, in which a substantial section of the party broke off to form what became the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Opposition to communism, in Southeast Asia as well as in Australia, was fundamental to the DLP's stance; thus, the question of 'troops to Malaya' acquired great symbolic significance in the ALP–DLP split. From 1955 to 1972, the DLP's electoral preferences were enormously important in keeping the Liberal–Country Party coalition in office and the ALP on the opposition benches. But splitting the ALP party was a bonus for the government, not a principal purpose of the commitment. The government worked hard to develop and implement a nuanced policy, skilfully applying the principles of forward defence: good policy proved to be electorally advantageous politics.

CHAPTER 3

The Indonesian Confrontation

After the end of the Malayan Emergency, Australia's political and military leaders' confidence in forward defence was soon tested, as new challenges arose in the early 1960s. What most concerned Canberra was the division between the Southeast Asian policies of its two great allies towards two developing crises in Southeast Asia. Since 1954, the US had assumed the role of protector of the Republic of Vietnam, commonly known as South Vietnam, under President Ngo Dinh Diem. Initially, Diem had seemed able and effective, but his corrupt and narrowly based regime was increasingly challenged by militant Buddhists and a growing communist insurgency, initiated and supported by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam. Hanoi and Washington were already fighting a proxy war in Laos, but a Geneva agreement of 1962, which supposedly neutralised Laos, brought only a temporary respite in the pressure. The US sought the support of its allies in Indochina. Under Menzies' leadership, the Australian Government was more than willing to respond but, to Australia's dismay, Britain clearly had no appetite to engage in what was, in effect, the start of the Vietnam War (more appropriately known as the Second Indochina War).

London's focus was further south, and most especially on the 'Confrontation' that President Sukarno of Indonesia had declared towards the proposal to join Malaya, Singapore and two former British colonies on the island of Borneo, Sabah (North Borneo) and Sarawak, into the new federation of Malaysia. The British portrayed Sukarno as a latter-day Hitler, with expansionist ambitions across the region, and pressed Australia and New Zealand for assistance. The US took a markedly different approach. Washington urged the Commonwealth countries to resist Confrontation with minimal force, in order to avoid unduly antagonising Sukarno and pushing him further into the hands of the Indonesian Communist Party (then the world's third largest communist party) and its allies in China and the Soviet Union. Most Australians were far more concerned about Indonesia than about events in Indochina, but when Australia's leaders asked anxiously whether they could expect support from the US if Confrontation escalated, the Americans gave distinctly cautious answers. They indicated that much would depend on the restraint with which the Commonwealth countries opposed Confrontation, and the level of support that Australia gave to the Americans in Indochina.

In short, Australia was being pulled in sharply different directions by its two great allies over two separate Southeast Asian crises, with each ally seeking support in one conflict while counselling against involvement in the other. The Australian Government was facing the greatest test of both its strategy and its statecraft since 1945.

Menzies clearly sympathised with the 'mother country' and its characterisation of Sukarno as a new Hitler or Mussolini, but his government's response to the developing crisis was notably cautious. Despite pressure from London, Menzies was reluctant to give unequivocal support to Malaysia against Indonesia. When he finally announced Australia's support for Malaysia, his statement read more like a highly qualified legal document than a robust political affirmation. Part of his caution may well have been a response to Washington's advice, but much of it came from another source.

The outstanding feature of Australia's handling of Confrontation was the role of the Minister for External Affairs (as Foreign Affairs was then known), Sir Garfield Barwick, and the diplomats of his department. The diplomats convinced Barwick, and he in turn convinced the cabinet more often than not, to adopt a nuanced and subtle approach. Australian policies were designed to dissuade Indonesia from 'confronting' Malaysia, and to give sufficient support to Britain to ensure that it remained engaged in the region and didn't withdraw its forces from 'east of Suez'—a prospect already being foreshadowed—but to act with great restraint. The upshot was a combination of military and diplomatic activity in a display of statecraft that one diplomat has, with justifiable pride, characterised as international best practice (Woodard 1998).

Australian reactions to requests from London for military support were highly cautious. Barwick, who had gained a reputation as one of the most forthright barristers at the robust Sydney bar, told the British that they should adopt a 'graduated response' to Indonesian aggression, taking military measures that were carefully calibrated, with the aim of allowing Malaysia to come into existence as planned, but without antagonising the Indonesians more than was absolutely unavoidable. His attitude clearly frustrated the British political and military leaders, as well as some in Australia, but the Australian cabinet generally followed this path. Pressure from London for military support from Australia began in late 1963, but the Australians agreed to send a squadron of Army engineers (to be engaged principally in building roads) only in April 1964. The crucial decision to send an RAR battalion was taken only in January 1965, after more than a year of pressure from London and Kuala Lumpur.

Australia didn't want to provoke Indonesia into escalating its campaign, especially as that might provoke a threat to the Australian-administered territories in the eastern half of New Guinea.

The caution in these commitments was based partly on assessments by Australian military and political intelligence to the effect that British and Malaysian military actions were sufficient to prevent the Indonesian campaign from succeeding. Australian authorities were generally well informed, from their own military and diplomatic sources, about developments in Indonesia and Malaysia. Australia didn't want to provoke Indonesia into escalating its campaign, especially as that might provoke a threat to the Australian-administered territories in the eastern half of New Guinea. Even after the battalion was committed, and Australian and Indonesian soldiers were engaged in combat, with fatalities on both sides, Australia kept diplomatic relations open, maintained trade, aid and educational exchanges, and even permitted Australian and Indonesian officers to attend each other's staff colleges.

Moreover, Barwick and the diplomats of External Affairs didn't simply echo British policies, but engaged in vigorous diplomacy in the region. The heads of the Australian missions in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, Keith Shann and TK Critchley, were outstandingly effective, but credit should also be given to several senior External Affairs officials in Canberra, with whom Barwick worked closely. The British suspected that Australia's decisions were unduly influenced by American attitudes, but the Australians insisted that their independent diplomacy was based on a clear assessment of our national interests, 'refined but not defined' (as the diplomats liked to say) by alliance considerations. The Indonesians clearly got the message that Australia was not merely echoing Britain. When the new federation of Malaysia was formally established in 1963, the British Embassy in Jakarta was sacked by rioters, but Australia's was left unscathed.

While the Australian Government was determined to maintain some distance from British diplomacy, it maintained confidence in British military tactics. After eventually committing an infantry battalion and an SAS squadron in early 1965, Australia maintained that commitment until Confrontation ended in late 1966. The government was happy to see our soldiers use the same small-unit operational methods as the British, Gurkha and Malaysian units that

they fought alongside, and maintained close supervision of their secret cross-border operations. The RAR and SAS troops, for their part, showed considerable skill in operating effectively but discreetly, inflicting casualties on the Indonesians without causing them humiliating loss of 'face'.

When Confrontation ended in 1966, Australian authorities were able to look back with pride on a successful exercise in statecraft, handled with subtlety and skill at the political, diplomatic and military levels. The coordinated and nuanced policy hadn't been achieved without difficulty. There were repeated episodes of tension between the Prime Minister and the Minister for External Affairs, and between their departments. Officials in the Prime Minister's Department accused External Affairs of being 'soft' on Indonesia, while the diplomats sometimes lectured their colleagues on the importance of ensuring a good long-term relationship with Jakarta. In short, the policy wasn't dictated unilaterally by the Prime Minister but emerged from robust discussions involving ministers and officials of several departments.

The politics of the Confrontation commitment outside the ministerial and bureaucratic milieu were also robust. Barwick faced criticism from a number in his own party, who thought he was too 'soft' on Indonesia. In the early 1960s, an unusual alliance was formed between the leader of the ALP opposition, Arthur Calwell, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had usually supported the conservative Coalition. Criticism of the government's supposed 'appeasement' of Indonesia was one expression of this strange alliance. By contrast, Calwell's deputy, Gough Whitlam, understood and supported the government's approach. Policy towards Indonesia thus contributed to the endemic tensions between the left and right wings of the ALP, and between its ageing leader and his young and ambitious deputy, strengthening the government's political position. But, once again, policy came before politics. The government worked hard to develop and implement a nuanced and independent policy; the political benefits it derived were a well-earned bonus.

CHAPTER 4

The Vietnam War

The handling of the commitment to Vietnam was in sharp contrast with that to Confrontation, despite the fact that many of the crucial decisions on the two conflicts were taken by largely the same people, over the same period (from late 1963 to mid-1965), and often at the same meetings of the principal ministerial and official committees.

Much of the difference came down to the role of Prime Minister Menzies. The caution that he displayed in decision-making on the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation was set aside when he addressed Vietnam. The evidence suggests that he believed that it was essential, in Australia's national interests, to ensure that the US remained committed to the security of Southeast Asia. The danger, as Menzies and many of his generation saw it, was not American imperialism, overreach or hubristic exaggeration of the capacity of American power: the real danger was American isolationism. It seemed impossible to believe that the US military—the most powerful the world had ever seen—could be defeated, provided its government was fully committed. It was understandable that Menzies, who had been a young man of military age during the First World War and Prime Minister from 1939 to 1941, should fear another experience of being engaged in a war without American support; but, in the circumstances of Southeast Asia in the 1960s, that was a flawed perspective. The strategic situation was such that even the mightiest superpower would struggle, and eventually fail, to preserve a non-communist regime in South Vietnam.

Menzies' views on Indochina were significantly shaped during the two years, 1960 and 1961, when he was Minister for External Affairs as well as Prime Minister. During that time, successive crises in Laos—in effect, early rounds of the Vietnam War—came to a head. The nature of global politics combined with Menzies' own predilections to ensure that he saw these crises primarily in terms of their impact on the Cold War relationships of the great powers. Britain and France were clearly determined to stay out of Indochina, making Menzies all the more determined to keep the US engaged. Under his leadership, the cabinet decided on three occasions between 1959 and 1961 that Australia would be prepared to fight alongside the US in Indochina. Menzies and his colleagues explicitly accepted that this could mean sacrificing several of their forward defence principles: Australia would fight alongside the US, even if that meant fighting without Britain or any of the other SEATO powers, and even at the risk of precipitating a nuclear conflict with China.

In the early 1960s, after more than a decade as Prime Minister, Menzies dominated decision-making on Indochina. Neither the Minister nor the officials of External Affairs would be allowed the influence they had exerted on policy towards Indonesia. Paul Hasluck, who replaced Barwick in April 1964, brought a formidable intellect and considerable experience to the position, but his relations with departmental officials were frosty. They thought that he was too deferential to Menzies; he thought that they were overconfident of their own abilities. Hasluck rebuked diplomats who seemed insufficiently supportive of the government's assessments of Vietnam.

In the crucial months of late 1964 and early 1965, Menzies shaped the policymaking process on Vietnam, excluding or minimising the influence of ministers and officials who expressed dissent or recommended caution. The diplomats were set aside, and the head of External Affairs, the formidable Arthur Tange, was a lame duck, his

departure having been signalled almost a year before it took effect. Instead, Menzies relied heavily on the two most senior military officers. The Air Force's flamboyant Frederick Scherger and Army's dour John Wilton had markedly different personalities, but both supported the Vietnam commitment. Wilton remained dedicated to SEATO and to a SEATO-aligned commitment to the war. Scherger had regretted American reluctance to intervene in 1954 in order to prevent the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu; he now wholeheartedly supported American and Australian involvement, confidently assuming that an American defeat was impossible. Menzies sent Scherger, but no-one from External Affairs, to a crucial meeting in Honolulu. There, Scherger blatantly disregarded his prudent and cautious official brief, which urged him to be noncommittal and to ask probing questions about American strategy. Instead, he pressed an Australian battalion onto the Americans, although the Americans had no clear strategy and had asked Australia only to increase its team of army advisers. Scherger was known to be close to Menzies, and the New Zealanders who witnessed his actions were probably right to conclude that he was acting at Menzies' personal direction.

By working closely with Scherger and Wilton while excluding other advisers, Menzies was able to drive decisions with minimal intervention or influence by other ministers and departments or the established ministerial and official committees, which had been working effectively. After he won his seventh successive federal election in 1963, his position in cabinet, in the party-room and in parliament was unassailable.

The exclusion of wider advice on Vietnam was particularly unfortunate, as Australians knew much less about events and political dynamics in mainland Southeast Asia than about developments in the islands and peninsulas to Australia's immediate north. We had a diplomatic mission in Saigon, but none in Hanoi or Beijing. We therefore had neither the opportunity to form independent assessments of North Vietnamese and Chinese policies or of the crucial relationship between the two communist regimes, nor the capacity to conduct the sort of independent diplomacy that was so effective in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur during Confrontation.

Australian ministers and diplomats didn't challenge official American analyses and policies over developments in Vietnam, as they'd challenged the British over both the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation.

No less important was our limited knowledge of policymaking within the government of our major ally. Australian ministers and diplomats didn't challenge official American analyses and policies over developments in Vietnam, as they'd challenged the British over both the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation. The Australian Government's sole aim was to urge the Americans to stay in Vietnam and maintain the fight. Public statements and private assurances from the White House and the State Department were accepted at face value, with limited insights into the bureaucratic battles between hawks and doves in the interagency process. In this respect, Australian policymakers were no worse off than many American officials and commentators, but they were unwise to rely on official American statements on critical episodes, such as the 1963 assassination of President Diem and the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Menzies didn't disguise his personal commitment. He told his key ministers that he was 'looking for a way in, and not a way out'. The outcome of his personal domination of the policy process was that Australian combat forces were committed to Vietnam with no exit strategy, no explicit or implied limit on the size or the duration of the commitment, and inadequate attention to ensuring that the forces could use their preferred operational methods. The RAR battalions in the Australian task force were too often required to adopt what Wilton called the Americans' 'meatgrinder' tactics, relying on technology and heavy firepower and accepting heavy casualties, rather than the jungle-fighting tactics the Australians had practised in Malaya and Borneo. This led to tensions between the American and Australian military leaders in Vietnam. The fault wasn't solely on the American side: some Australian

leaders probably underestimated the nature and dimensions of the communist challenge in 1965, by which time it was too late to rely solely on the counterinsurgency tactics used in Malaya and the Confrontation. But the result was that the Australians were thrust into major battles and exposed to casualty rates that the Americans considered unexceptionable, but which caused rising dismay to Australian political leaders, the Australian public and the soldiers themselves.

The command and control arrangements were also uncongenial. In the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation, Australian and allied forces had operated within a system that carefully coordinated the civilian, military and police agencies of all the national forces involved, with clear lines of command and responsibility. The Free World forces in Vietnam, by contrast, comprised a loosely coordinated coalition, within which major tensions and rivalries were generated between countries, services, agencies and individuals. The lines of command and control, even for a relatively small contingent such as the Australian Force Vietnam, resembled a child's plate of spaghetti.

These and other factors contributed to the growing unpopularity of a commitment that had started with substantial public support. The main arguments behind the commitment were the domino theory and the insurance policy. The widespread volatility in Southeast Asia gave the domino theory some validity when the crucial decisions were made from 1963 to 1965, but by 1968 and 1969 much had changed. Malaysia and Singapore were more stable after their split in 1965 than before; Thailand was less vulnerable to communist pressure, having suppressed an insurgency near the Laos border; most importantly, Indonesia was on a totally different path after the events of late 1965; and the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) indicated some desire by the non-communist nations of the region to cooperate.

Some form of Australian commitment to support our American ally was understandable, and probably inevitable, in 1965. It was both an exercise in burden-sharing and advisable in our own interests, given the possible escalation of Confrontation and a potential threat to our responsibilities in New Guinea. But the way Menzies and his successor, Harold Holt, handled the commitment in its early years made it extremely difficult to withdraw after about 1968, as public opinion turned against the war. John Gorton, Prime Minister from 1968 to 1971, clearly felt trapped by the decisions of his predecessors. If Menzies and Holt had handled the commitment with greater skill and dexterity—that is, with superior statecraft—it might have been possible for Australia to withdraw, or to significantly reduce its exposure to casualties abroad and tensions at home, before the 'moratorium' marches and other protests of the early 1970s.

The deficiencies in statecraft had a long-term impact on domestic party politics. Menzies evidently believed that the commitment would not only have broad popular support but would once again drive a wedge between the right and left wings of the ALP. Events in previous years encouraged such hopes, but by the time the first combat battalion was committed, Labor was alive to the dangers. Calwell gave what's now regarded as one of Australia's greatest political speeches, which held the party together on a policy of opposition to the war. Holt won a massive victory at the 1966 election, fought on the issues of Vietnam and conscription, but as the war dragged on, with rising cost in blood and treasure, public opinion turned towards Labor. A highly selective system of national service, which sent more than 15,000 conscripts to Vietnam, where 200 of them died, greatly exacerbated the unpopularity of the war, even though the scheme had been introduced with Confrontation in mind as much as Vietnam. Most of the Australian troops were withdrawn by William McMahon in 1971, but by that time Gough Whitlam's reputation for superior understanding of international affairs would help him to win the 1972 election and to form the first ALP federal government in 23 years.

In short, the problem wasn't simply that the government applied the principles of forward defence to the Vietnam commitment, as it had done previously to the Emergency and Confrontation. The problem lay less in the broad strategy than in the statecraft with which it was applied. More skilful policymaking in 1964 and 1965 could have led to a more carefully calibrated policy, which would have secured the geopolitical benefit of 'holding the line' against communist influence and the diplomatic benefit of supporting the American alliance, while reducing Australia's exposure to the long-term political, diplomatic and social costs of the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER 5

Some lessons for today

Since the 1960s, library shelves have groaned under the weight of books on ‘the lessons of Vietnam’. Most have been written by and for Americans, who were puzzled and frustrated by what many in the US regarded as their first defeat. Like many other aspects of the commitment, the lessons of Vietnam for Australia are similar and related, but not identical, to America’s. The preceding chapters suggest that Australians should seek to learn the lessons not of the Vietnam War but of the Vietnam era—in other words, the period when Australia was militarily engaged not only in the Vietnam War but also in the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation. Our collective memory seems to have done the opposite of what individual memories generally do. We remember the pain and costs of the Vietnam War, and have allowed that memory to discredit anything that could be associated with it, while forgetting the strategic and other benefits gained, at much lower cost, by the commitments to the Malayan Emergency and the Confrontation.

Lesson 1: We need a coherent national security strategy

Lesson 1 is that Australia needs a national strategy that provides a framework for all our security policies, including those that use both hard and soft power assets. This isn’t the place to enter the subtle debate as to what constitutes strategy. We know, for example, that the Americans, at least in theory, prepare a National Security Strategy issued by the President; subordinate to this is a National Defense Strategy, issued by the Secretary of Defense; and subordinate to that is a National Military Strategy, issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Something similar, adapted to Australian constitutional arrangements, might be appropriate.

The major need, however, is not for detailed, formal documents. Some elements of a national strategy, such as doubts about the wisdom or capacity of one’s allies, must be kept to confidential discussions. More important is that Cabinet ministers and their most senior advisers have in mind a broad strategic concept, the major ‘organizing principles’ (to use Hillary Clinton’s phrase) of which are well understood by policymakers and, as far as possible, the public.

In Australia’s case, our national security strategy must strike an appropriate balance between commitments and resources, between alliances and regional relationships, and between military and non-military assets. It should provide a coherent framework within which Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and all the other relevant agencies can develop their own strategies. It should also underpin the public’s support for the commitments that the government decides to make, or not to make, in a particular crisis.

As a national strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, forward defence wasn’t perfect, but, provided its basic principles were understood, it responded reasonably well to the demands of the time. It provided a template that enabled the government of the day to decide how to respond to particular crises, including on such questions as whether, how, when and where to commit military forces, and when to rely on diplomacy and other non-military approaches. It gave direction to long-term policies, not just to crisis management.

Lesson 2: Statecraft is as important as state power

To develop a national strategy is necessary, and difficult enough (as anyone involved can testify), but it isn't sufficient. Lesson 2 is that the statecraft with which the strategy is applied is extremely important. As the old song says, it's not (just) what you do, it's the way that you do it.

As Australia's experience in the Vietnam War showed, it's crucially important not to assume that the basic principles of a strategy can be applied with a complacent assumption that what has worked in one case will necessarily work in another. Prudent decision-making must include constant and vigorous diplomacy, with allies and with other relevant parties, leading to independent political and military assessments. Any commitments that are made must be carefully defined, with express limits to their extent and duration.

In this respect, it's instructive to compare Menzies' commitment to Vietnam in 1965 with John Howard's commitment to Iraq in 2003. Howard ensured that Australian forces were inserted quickly and removed quickly; they were given a specific responsibility, within their capacity and with the ability to employ their own tactics and operational methods; they operated under rules of engagement that, combined with military skill and a little luck, resulted in no battle casualties; and they were all volunteers, not conscripts. As a result, although the Iraq commitment was less clearly related to Australia's interests, other than alliance management, than Vietnam and was less popular from the outset, Howard and his party didn't pay the political price paid by Liberals in the 1970s and for long afterwards.

Lesson 3: Good policy can be good politics

Lesson 3 is that, in the long run, good policy is good politics, even if there may be a short-term cost. In both the Emergency and the Confrontation, the Menzies government developed sound policies that could be sustained in the long term, while sensitive to potential criticisms from both left and right. In each case, it was able to claim that the policy had been vindicated; and, in each case, its policies helped to widen the tensions between the right and left wings of the ALP. This success seems to have unduly influenced Menzies, who, by 1964–65, was in the last term of his record tenure of the prime ministership. He deprecated some of the centre-left critics of his Vietnam policies, who asserted that Australia was putting itself on the wrong side of Asian nationalism, by saying that they'd been proved wrong when they'd made similar claims about Malaya in the 1950s. He failed to recognise that the critics were on firmer ground on Vietnam than they had been on Malaya.

Menzies also appeared confident that the Vietnam commitment would receive broad popular support and drive another wedge between the wings of the ALP. He didn't see that the party had a stronger case in 1965 than it had in the early 1950s, and that it had learned valuable lessons about how to handle its position on the commitment, as was shown in the preparation of Calwell's speech. For a time, the confidence of Menzies and his successor, Holt, seemed justified: Holt won an unprecedentedly strong electoral victory in the 1966 election. But from the beginning of 1968, John Gorton was clearly frustrated by his inability to pull out of Vietnam, and in the longer term the war was an albatross around the Liberal Party's neck. In the 1980s, the party's federal president lamented that Vietnam had cost the Liberals the support of a generation.

Lesson 4: Never ignore diplomacy

A corollary of this is Lesson 4, which relates to the idea, much discussed in recent times, that all Australian commitments of forces overseas should be subject to parliamentary decision. While this has obvious attractions to democrats of most types, experience suggests some drawbacks. This pressure comes largely from critics of Australia's commitments to Vietnam and to Iraq (in 2003 and 2014), and seems to assume that parliament would act as a brake on an over-eager executive. That assumption isn't necessarily valid. During Confrontation, for example, many on both sides of politics expressed vehement criticisms of Indonesia and of the Australian Government for its alleged 'appeasement' of Sukarno. As this paper argues, skilful statecraft sometimes involved complex and

discreet military and diplomatic manoeuvres. An open parliamentary debate would doubtless have led to blunt denunciations of Sukarno's real or assumed intentions, making it extraordinarily difficult for the government to maintain diplomatic, trade, aid and other relationships, even while Australian and Indonesian soldiers were inflicting casualties on each other. Parliamentary debate would inevitably focus heavily on the military aspects of any commitment, obscuring and making more difficult the concurrent diplomatic and political elements, which are equally, if not more, important to success.

A further corollary is the desirability of governments *not* withdrawing ambassadors at times of tension. It's precisely at such times that governments most need able ambassadors in place, using their contacts, skills and experience to minimise and contain the tensions and to seek fruitful ways forward. Australia's policies over Confrontation were developed in Canberra, but they owed much of their success to Shann's advice on Indonesian policies and politics and to his ability to convey Australia's views to Sukarno and the other Indonesian leaders.

Lesson 5: Listen to critics, whoever they are

Lesson 5 is that good policy doesn't come easily. While decisions about war or peace are always ultimately decisions for the Prime Minister, the commitments of the Vietnam era demonstrate the importance of robust policy discussion, involving a wide range of ministers and departmental officials, in which Prime Ministers and their closest advisers are willing to listen to critics both inside and outside the policy process. Menzies' greatest successes in foreign relations came when he gave a degree of freedom to capable ministers, as he did to Barwick over Confrontation (and earlier to Percy Spender over the negotiation of ANZUS and to John McEwen over the commerce treaty with Japan). Conversely, he was least successful when he deliberately sidelined or overruled key ministers, as he did with Richard Casey over the Suez crisis and other ministers over Vietnam.

As this is written, Julie Bishop is being widely acclaimed as one of the outstanding performers in the Abbott government. Historical experience suggests that Abbott would be wise to give Bishop a good deal of freedom of manoeuvre, based on a clear understanding of their respective roles and on extensive discussions in the National Security Committee of Cabinet. The temptations for a prime minister to seek a dominant role in foreign affairs and matters of national security are extremely strong, but a wise one gives priority to domestic matters, especially in a government's first term.

Lesson 6: Understand our allies and engage in our region

Lesson 6 is that national security policy works most effectively when the government is able to deploy not only a well-trained and well-equipped defence force, but also a skilled, competent and confident foreign service, and when there's mutual confidence between ministers and officials. In recent years, a consensus has emerged that Australia's greatest need in national security policy is a considerable boost to the fortunes of DFAT. (Robert Gates, as US Secretary of Defense, similarly prioritised the State Department's resources over the Pentagon's.) Much of the commentary has focused on the size and resources of the foreign service and the number of missions to which diplomats are sent. At the time of the last election, there was a widespread expectation that an incoming Coalition government would boost DFAT's resources, probably by reducing the budget for AusAID. Instead, the Abbott government merged the two agencies. Whether that will prove the right answer remains an open question. As two agencies of similar size but decidedly different cultures, located in different parts of Canberra, are forced together, there's certainly short-term pain: let's hope for the long-term gain.

But the key issue isn't a matter of numbers and resources, however important they may be. A vital element is confidence—self-confidence (short of hubristic arrogance) on the part of the diplomats and mutual confidence between officials and ministers. The government must show, by actions as well as words, that it regards DFAT as having a significant and respected role in formulating policy, and doesn't regard its diplomats as mere functionaries whose role is to implement decisions taken in the Prime Minister's Office, the Department of Prime Minister and

Cabinet, or other agencies. As the forward defence era showed, good statecraft requires vigorous, independent, well-resourced and well-informed diplomacy as much as a strong and effective defence force.

Australian diplomacy, which necessarily involves many departments along with DFAT, needs to give priority to two areas. One priority is obtaining and maintaining the best possible access to, and interaction with, the US and other allies. Our representatives must get behind the official assessments and declaratory policies to understand the dynamics that shape long-term policies. A major weakness in policymaking on Vietnam was that the Australian Government had too little information about what was happening in Washington's interagency process. Taking at face value the statements from the White House or the State Department on, for example, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was not conducive to sound, long-term policymaking.

The other priority is to maintain the closest possible engagement with regional countries, especially Indonesia. Much attention has been given in recent years to the Australia–US–China triangle, with the corollary that we must devote great effort to understanding, and where possible influencing, the bilateral relationship between Washington and Beijing. No less important for Australian policymakers, although less commonly noticed, is the need to pay constant attention to the Australia–US–Indonesia triangle, including the bilateral relationship between Washington and Jakarta. Today, no less than in the 1960s, this triangle has a fundamental role in shaping Australia's long-term relationships with the world.

Lesson 7: Demand and allow longer term perspectives

Lesson 7 is the importance of the government developing policies that are designed for the long term, beyond the three-year electoral cycle, and not just as reactions to crises, whether foreseen or unexpected. Politicians will inevitably be focused on surviving the next election, and departments are under immense pressure to comply with the pressures of the 24-hour media cycle and 140-character tweets. It should be part of the public service's responsibility, especially in departments like Defence and Foreign Affairs, to encourage ministers to consider longer term developments. To a large degree, such thinking has been outsourced to think tanks. DFAT has taken an important step forward by re-establishing a policy planning section in DFAT. That section had some successes in the 1960s, until it was disbanded by an unsympathetic minister. A revived policy planning area in DFAT should do useful work on long-term projections, working in consultation with think tanks such as ASPI, the Lowy Institute and the US Studies Centre; other agencies, including the Office of National Assessments, Defence, and the National Security Adviser; and comparable agencies in other governments, such as the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department. Defence might well consider establishing a similar unit.

Lesson 8: Know the past and learn from it

Finally, Lesson 8 is that the government should systematically aim to learn from the past to address the problems of the future. Some of Julie Bishop's major speeches show that she's been making good use of the department's historical section, which was founded by an earlier Liberal foreign minister, Paul Hasluck, himself a distinguished historian. Kevin Andrews (or whoever succeeds him in the regrettably rapid turnover of Ministers for Defence) would do well to establish a comparable historical section in Defence to record and analyse major aspects of strategic and (to use one of Arthur Tange's favourite phrases) 'higher defence' policy, which are outside the scope of the historical sections of the three services. (Defence Secretary Dennis Richardson, a history graduate whose academic mentor was the distinguished diplomatic historian Neville Meaney, might well be sympathetic.) As the DFAT comparison suggests, there are some things that can only be done by an in-house unit working separately from, but with some degree of collaboration with, academic historians such as those at the Australian National University, the Australian Defence Force Academy and a few institutions outside Canberra. Defence has already taken a valuable step in this direction by publishing a volume of the 'Strategic basis' papers (Fruehling 2009), but there's scope for much more to be done.

It is appropriate to end this paper on a note of cautious congratulations. For some time the government has been urged by veterans, historians and other commentators to commission official histories of Australia's commitments in Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. As was frequently noted in the commentary surrounding the centenary of the Gallipoli landing, Australia's understanding of the nation's involvement in the 1914–18 war has been shaped to a significant degree by the official history, for which CEW Bean was appointed official historian. Since then, Australian governments have appointed four further official war historians: Gavin Long for the 1939–45 war, Robert O'Neill for the Korean War, this writer for the three conflicts discussed in this paper, and David Horner, whose current remit covers an extensive range of peacekeeping and post-Cold War operations, but not those in Timor, Iraq or Afghanistan.

In the budget statement on 12 May, the government announced that money had been allocated for a six-volume official history of the Iraq and Afghanistan commitments and a single volume on the Timor commitment. This is greatly to be welcomed, provided these histories are to be written under the same conditions as their predecessors. Over the past century Australian governments of all political persuasions have granted the five official historians, and their respective teams of writers and researchers, unrestricted access to official records and freedom from any official or political censorship. The evidence suggests, I believe, that these official histories have served the nation well as a record of events and a basis for informed debate.

In recent years, however, there have been regrettable signs that departments, under actual or anticipated pressure from ministers, have discouraged some histories, and have exercised excessive restraint in 'clearing' official or authorised histories, usually for fear of short-term political or diplomatic difficulties. This has affected even departments like DFAT and Defence, which have for decades had an outstanding record in encouraging well-researched and independently written histories of sensitive topics.

It is particularly important that the strategic dimensions of the Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan histories be fully covered in the new official histories. This area was pioneered in Australian official histories by Robert O'Neill's volume on Australian strategy and diplomacy in the Korean War. This remains the best account of the origins of ANZUS (O'Neill 1981). The official history for which I was appointed was originally to cover only the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War. It took some effort to have Confrontation included, but our understanding of the period and its lessons would have been greatly diminished if that had been omitted. Governments, at political and official levels, should have the confidence to tolerate brief media or diplomatic controversies in the interests of promoting well-informed historical debate, which can make a major contribution to good long-term policymaking.

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NOTES

- 1 'Great nations need organizing principles, and "Don't do stupid stuff" is not an organizing principle.' Hillary Clinton, quoted in Goldberg (2014).
- 2 The following is based on Edwards (2014), which in turn is based on Edwards (1992) and Edwards (1997).

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---|
| ALP | Australian Labor Party |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| ASIO | Australian Security Intelligence Organisation |
| DFAT | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade |
| DLP | Democratic Labor Party |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| RAAF | Royal Australian Air Force |
| RAN | Royal Australian Navy |
| RAR | Royal Australian Regiment |
| SAS | Special Air Service |
| SEATO | Southeast Asia Treaty Organization |

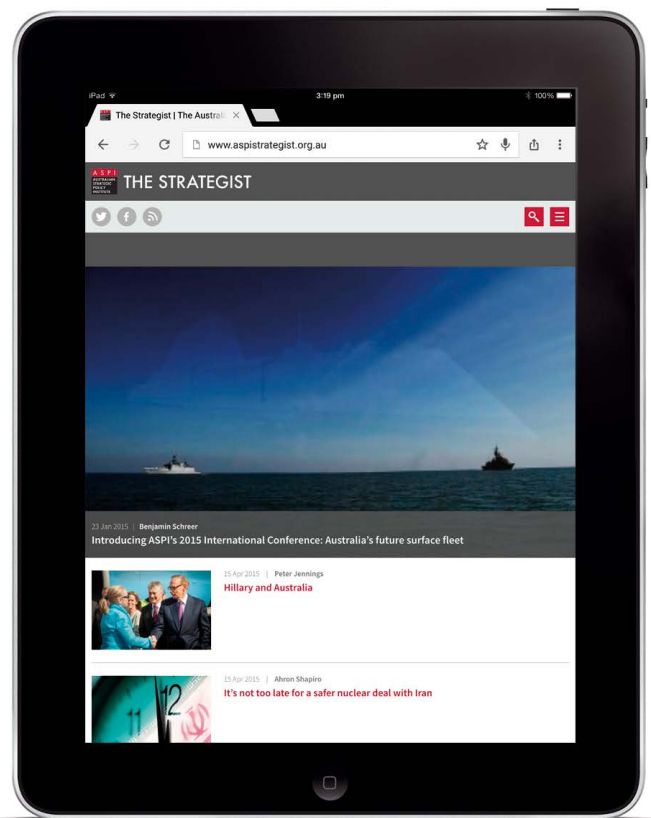
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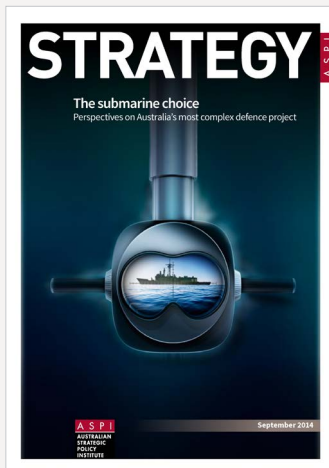
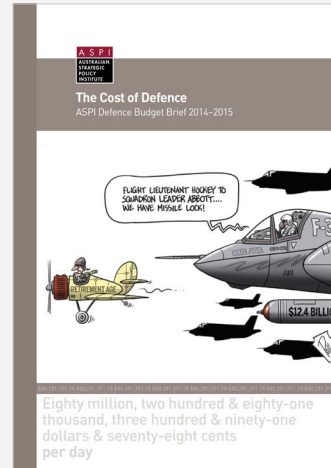


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Like many of our friends and allies, Australia is currently engaged in a major reassessment of its strategic policy. Those in and around the policymaking process are trying to define the nation’s core values and interests, to identify the most likely threats to those values and interests, and to frame a strategy that will best protect and promote our national security. This is happening at a time when many defence budgets are severely constrained. A period of postwar economic austerity would seem to be the worst time to prepare a long-term national security strategy.

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, American diplomatic historian Melvyn Leffler turned this familiar dilemma on its head. Periods of postwar austerity and drastic cuts in military spending, according to him, have been good for American strategy, ‘forcing Washington to think strategically, something it rarely does when times are flush’. Looking at the past hundred years of American strategy, Leffler argued that problems and errors arose less from tight budgets than from clinging too long to outdated strategic ideas and capabilities, under the influence of bureaucratic and domestic politics.

This paper takes a similar approach to Australian strategic thinking. The strategic calculations of a regional middle power are in some respects similar to those of a global superpower, but in others decidedly different from them. The fiscal circumstances are different, and not just because the Australian defence budget is a mere fraction of the American. Questions about the allocation of roles and resources between the military, diplomatic, intelligence and other agencies have some common themes. There’s much discussion about the nature and meaning of strategy, and where strategic planning’s to be found in the governmental structure. Does the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ‘do strategy’, or is strategy the exclusive territory of the Department of Defence? Moreover, some of Australia’s problems may have come not only from clinging too long to outdated ideas, but also from discarding some that are still relevant—perhaps we’ve thrown out some strategic babies with the bathwater.

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