

REBALANCING AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY PRIORITIES

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe talks to former Australian Army Chief **Peter Leahy** about Australian defence policy.

As the withdrawal from Afghanistan gains momentum, Australia is set to enter a new era in its national security. In late July, **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** interviewed former Australian Army chief **General Peter Leahy**, now a professor at the National Security Institute, University of Canberra. The wide-ranging conversation focused on Australia's national security interests, including its future role in Afghanistan; national security considerations post-2014; defence self-reliance; the importance of strengthening ties with Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea; and the need to maintain some strategic autonomy in the Australia-US alliance.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Thus far, what do you think Australia has achieved in Afghanistan? Should the Australian Defence Force (ADF) continue to play a role in Afghanistan after the 2014 departure date?

Peter Leahy: Australia quite justifiably went into Afghanistan in October 2001 with the mission of helping punish al Qaeda and removing the Taliban from power. Al Qaeda are much weakened and dispersed; the Taliban were removed but remain a formidable, deadly and influential force. It remains to be seen what form they take and the influence they will wield as a result of the inevitable political deals in Afghanistan as the Allied forces depart.

Australia has achieved a great deal in Uruzgan province and we should be proud of our efforts there. We have given the people of the province a chance to stabilise a desperate situation; the

economic, governance and security situations have improved; and our reconstruction, mentoring and training efforts have built an effective Afghan security force. The Afghans are keen to take responsibility for their own security. However, success is not assured and there is much more to be done. The time for military support is largely over. Now it is time for providing continued development aid and assured financial support. This will be hard to deliver, especially if the security situation deteriorates.

I am concerned that Afghanistan will remain critically dependent on aid donations to sustain its security and development efforts. The West may not have the resolve to sustain the level of financial support required for the length of time it will be needed. With the move towards peace talks, the declaration of victory of a kind by the West and promises of continued support invite comparisons with Vietnam in the early 1970s. Let's hope that Afghanisation does not look like Vietnamisation.

Militarily Australia is moving to a new phase in Afghanistan—withdrawal, transition and leaving behind a smaller but specialised training force. From all indications, this may also include a continued role for our Special Forces. Their likely counterterrorism role will



Peter Leahy retired as Chief of the Australian Army in July 2008. In October 2008 he was appointed as the foundation Director of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra.

be dangerous and complicated, and I am far from convinced about its merits. If they remain, we must ensure that our troops are protected and able to conduct their tasks in a legal and ethical manner. A strong status of forces agreement; crystal clear rules of engagement; and meticulous, auditable and legally sanctioned targeting procedures must be non-negotiable elements of any Australian counterterrorism role in Afghanistan. Other thorny issues will be the use of local intelligence and involvement in operations using attack drones. On balance, I do not support a continued counterterrorism role for our Special Forces in Afghanistan.

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What are Australia's national security priorities now and in the foreseeable future? With the withdrawal from Afghanistan, are we seeing the end of the '9/11 decade'?

Peter Leahy: It used to be that national security was simple. Threats were from nation states, and the primary tools to defend and secure the nation were spies, diplomats and the military. In recent years, the security environment has become much more complex. While the threat of a conventional military attack on Australia remains a possibility, it has been assessed as unlikely.

At the same time, new threats and challenges to our security are emerging—and are likely to increase in the future. Many of these threats come from non-state actors such as terrorists, transnational criminals, and people smugglers. Yet more challenges to Australia and the world community are evident in the potential for adverse consequences from climate change, food, water and energy shortages, cyber attacks, and the incidence of failed and failing states.

National security is now a much-expanded concept. Rather than being only about territorial integrity and sovereignty, it now encompasses

how we live in our community and our sense of well-being. There are many more players—such as the Australian Federal Police, AusAID, and Customs and Border Protection—in an expanded national security community. Most play a role at home and abroad.

As a result, Australia is facing difficult choices in pursuit of the nation's security. Government is faced with real difficulties in identifying the threat, determining the correct response, allocating priorities, and resourcing the development of new capabilities to cope with an expanding list of threats.

We need to rebalance our priorities and think more about securing Australia rather than just defending it. A reduction in the expenditure on high-end defence capabilities should therefore be considered. The funds released would allow defence to properly support the capabilities required for the most likely defence missions and allow a broader national security community to develop by, for example, properly funding the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, extending the capabilities of the AFP International Deployment Group, and allowing AusAID to provide more support to fragile regional states.

Australia might be withdrawing from Afghanistan, but this does not mean there won't be similar missions in the future. Interventions are likely as the United Nations further develops the emerging notions of 'Human Security' and the 'Responsibility to Protect' and Australia sits on the UN Security Council. Stabilisation, peace and humanitarian deployments are the most likely future strategic missions. Combined with a changed understanding of national security and emerging threats and challenges, it is necessary to rebalance defence, diplomacy, aid and security budgets.

Regarding the end of the 9/11 decade, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard referred to the end of the 9/11 decade when launching the National Security Strategy in January this year. The prime minister was wrong if she meant the end of the 9/11 decade signalled the end of a decade of counterterrorism. The global terrorist threat has changed but remains strong. We are not yet safe from terrorism, and victory is not yet in sight. Yes, the terrorist threat in Afghanistan has diminished

but it has dispersed across the globe and found refuge in other unstable places. In addition, the threat of home-grown terrorists cannot be discounted. State-sponsored terrorism too is again on the rise, especially in the Middle East.

We will most likely endure many more decades during which terrorism will feature as a persistent and dangerous threat. In this, Australia is likely to remain a part of the US global response to terrorism. We should also be concerned about terrorism in our region. In this regard, we should acknowledge the sterling work that Indonesia is doing to counter the serious problem it is confronted with.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: As seen in the recent Defence White Paper, there has been a lot of talk about self-reliance in defence. Given that most countries worldwide are facing difficulty achieving it, do you believe this is a realistic objective, especially in relation to high-end capabilities?

Peter Leahy: Only a few countries are self-reliant globally. Even countries like the United Kingdom are heavily dependent on US support. Defence self-reliance is a fantasy for Australia. Despite our best intentions, the ADF is not self-reliant and this places severe limitations on our ability to make sovereign decisions. Past white papers trumpeted self-reliance as the foundation of our defence. Australia claimed the ability to act independently, lead military coalitions, and make tailored contributions to other activities. It is obvious that Australia cannot defend itself alone. We have to learn to live with this reality.

The most recent white paper speaks bravely of our efforts to defend ourselves to the greatest extent possible but acknowledges in the 'extreme' that we would have to depend on direct support from allied combat forces (read America).

Right now Australia can do little without US support. We may not need US boots on the ground but we need US intelligence, logistics, materiel and technical support for almost every other level of conflict. Yes, we have ships and planes but we can't operate them without the source codes and regular updates of software, navigation and targeting information only available from the United States. We also need ammunition and maintenance, which is mostly

US sourced. What if the Americans need it themselves for higher priority conflicts or decide not to make it available to us?

The 2013 white paper has correctly, if somewhat disingenuously, identified the scale of the problem of Australia achieving military self-reliance. But it is not just 'extreme' events where we would need support. There are very few military situations where Australia could operate independently. The white paper has done us a favour by highlighting the problem.

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Now that Australia is increasingly refocusing its attention on the Asia-Pacific region, strengthening ties with Indonesia has become more and more important. What do you think about the importance of the relationship with Indonesia?

Peter Leahy: I think it is a vital element of our future and we need to be doing more to engage with Indonesia as an ally and national security partner. An Indonesian friend once told me what Indonesia wanted from Australia was a secure southern border. Australia should seek the reciprocal from Indonesia. A secure northern border would be firmly in Australia's national interests. Our interests also lie in developing trade and economic relationships with a fast growing and developing economic powerhouse who is also a close geographic neighbour.

In our xenophobic manner, Australia spent nearly half a century painting Indonesia as a threat. Instead of a sea-air gap to our north, there is a bridge—a land-sea-air-land bridge—that we have ignored. Both countries are inextricably linked. It is time to reinforce the bridge.

It might surprise Australians to know that Indonesians don't routinely focus on Australia. They are more interested in territorial integrity, the growth of their democracy, the sea lines of communications (SLOC) that crisscross the

Indonesian archipelago, combating terrorism, expanding their economy, and providing for their growing population. Rather than pursuing narrow ways of benefitting from Indonesia, Australia should seek a much deeper and more comprehensive strategic partnership with Indonesia.

Indonesia has moved from dictatorship to democracy, is balancing Islam and modernisation, has strong growth prospects, and is a leader in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Australia should enthusiastically support and encourage Indonesia's development, and deepen cooperation and understanding at all levels.

For some time, I was concerned that East Timor would be an irritant in Australia's relationship with Indonesia. I am happy to say I was wrong.

The Indian and Pacific oceans merge around Australia. From a defence point of view, these straits and others, in the vicinity of Papua New Guinea, are the primary naval approaches to Australia. We should help enhance Indonesia's maritime capabilities so that as 'national security' partners, they can contribute more to the integrity of the region's SLOC and their own archipelagic waters. Introducing enhanced capabilities and improved naval and air interoperability between the two countries would be a good start. Another much-needed step is to develop a maritime equivalent of the very successful Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation. This would link our naval, air, customs, fisheries and immigration agencies in a cooperative relationship.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: As equally close neighbours to Australia, how should bilateral ties be strengthened with East Timor and Papua New Guinea?

Peter Leahy: East Timor and Papua New Guinea are important to Australia's prosperity and security. We need to maintain strong and productive relationships with both countries. For the

immediate future this will require development aid. If there is insecurity in either place, Australia will have to be involved. Let's use our aid in a focused manner to preclude instability. Australia will also be involved in relief operations in the event of major humanitarian disasters. In a conventional security sense, both countries are an extension of that northern flank I spoke of in relation to Indonesia, and provide a major element of the archipelagic shield to Australia's north. We need to establish strong and open relationships with both countries well before any threat materialises. This will not always be easy to achieve.

For some time, I was concerned that East Timor would be an irritant in Australia's relationship with Indonesia. I am happy to say I was wrong. I now see a strong and growing relationship between East Timor and Indonesia. It is a relationship surprisingly free of acrimony about past events and clearly focused on the future. I attended a conference in Jakarta recently and heard speeches from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao. They both spoke of strategic trust and the need to look forward. I was impressed with the approach they both took, the mature way they dealt with past issues, and the warmth of the personal relationship between the two men. I think there is now room for all three countries to move forward with a positive and mutually beneficial relationship.

Australia has strong security, economic, emotional and historical ties with Papua New Guinea. While the relationship waxes mercurial, there is no question in my mind that Australia will always be there to support Papua New Guinea. It is not unthinkable that there might be a major breakdown in the security situation in Papua New Guinea requiring an Australian reaction to evacuate our citizens and possibly meet a request for security support. This raises real questions of capacity for Australia in the event of a breakdown in the internal security of PNG or if there is an external threat.

While Australia has done much to think about the defence of Northern Australia, little thought has been given to how we would act to bolster defence in the countries to our north. Do we think any enemy will ignore them on their way south?

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Australia appears to be moving closer to the United States than ever before, and this has sparked a lively debate about the implications of becoming too close to our closest ally. What's your stance on the issue?

Peter Leahy: The relationship between Australia and America is strong and has benefited both countries. Indeed, Australia has been the major beneficiary. The security and stability that the US presence brings to the Asia-Pacific region is an important foundation stone of Australia's security and prosperity. We should remain close to America but within limits that are yet to be explored. I often wonder whether there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. I am concerned that we have got ourselves into a way of thinking that means we may be unable to say no to America. We are so dependent on them that we cannot afford to lose any of their support.

Ensuring that US support will always be available has become an important element of our decision-making processes. This involves our interpretation of ANZUS and what some people see as making down-payments on our defence insurance policy to receive US support and involvement when we need it. Are we to make decisions based on our values and sovereign national interests or because we are concerned that if we don't help the United States in every situation, they won't turn up when we need them?

It is hard to imagine a situation where America would not support Australia and vice versa, but in the realm of sovereign nations, there is always the possibility of divergent national interests. The United States and Australia pursued different interests over Irian Jaya in the 1960s, and US interests prevailed over our view. In my view, our close relationship with the United States constrains our freedom of foreign policy decision-making and our ability to pursue independent actions.

This is evident in the question of bases. So far US requests for an enhanced presence in Australia are reasonable and manageable. They are associated with access, training and maintenance. We already gain considerable benefit from 'Joint Bases,' and the increased Marine presence in Darwin is

a sensible move. What would be of concern are efforts to establish sovereign US bases that pursue independent US agendas, rather than bases where Australia has full knowledge and joint control of what goes on. As the US withdrawal from Afghanistan accelerates, Australia should be alert to increasing requests, especially from US air and naval forces.

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The answer to any future requests for an increased American presence is likely to be yes, but we should be alert to too much of a good thing and conscious of the regional reaction. Indonesia's initial reaction to the 2012 deployment of US Marines to Darwin was less than positive. They changed their mind quickly but it is a guide to what we might expect in the future. Let's welcome the United States and support them as our most important alliance partner but make it clear that there are limits.

When considering the growing US presence in Australia, it is interesting to watch the approach of some Australians that are based on geography rather than politics. These are only faint murmurings but are likely to amplify over time, influenced by the arrival of US naval and air forces with different roles in what some call the Indo-Pacific region. If you are from the West Coast of Australia, defence means the Indian Ocean and resource protection; if you are from Darwin, it means the archipelago to the north and asylum seekers, and if you are from the East Coast, it means the Pacific and a focus on Asia. So far, the Pacific approach has held sway because of the concentration of strategic thinking and decision-making in Canberra. I suspect we will soon see shifts that will complicate defence policymaking, which is why we need to publicly debate these matters.