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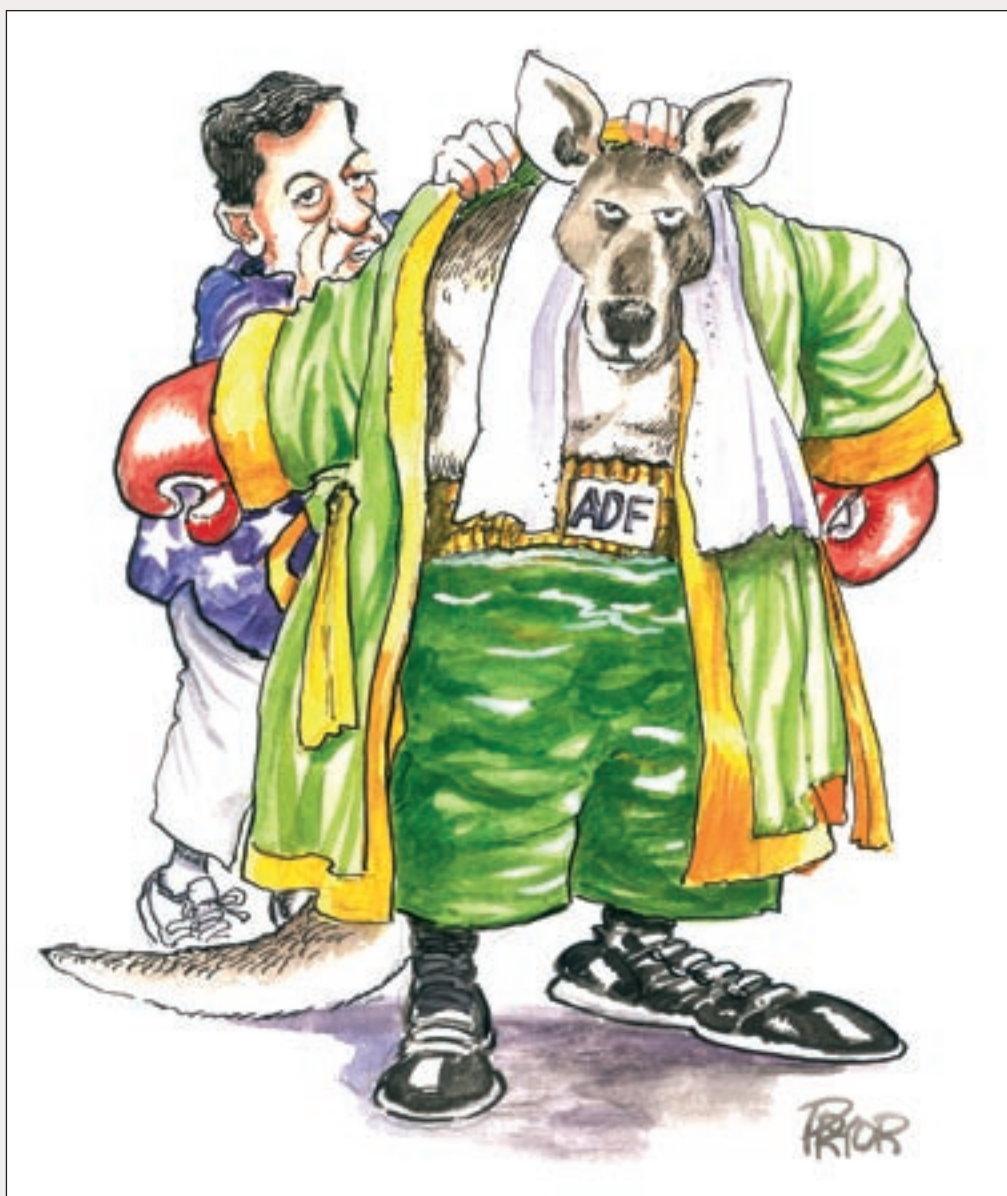
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## Punching above our weight?

### Australia as a middle power

by Mark Thomson

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Cartoon courtesy of Geoff Pryor

On a scorching hot fourth of July in 1919, Jack Dempsey fought Jess Willard for the world heavyweight boxing championship. In what's regarded as one of the great fights of all time, Dempsey knocked Willard down seven times in the first round. When the fight ended two rounds later, Dempsey was the new champion, and Willard was nursing a broken jaw, two cracked ribs, four missing teeth and a smashed nose. What made Dempsey's victory all the more extraordinary was that he gave away sixty-seven pounds and five inches in height to the gargantuan 245-pound, six-foot-six Willard, who had previously killed an opponent in the ring. Dempsey, who was only really a light-heavyweight at 178 pounds, was truly 'punching above his weight'.

For a long time now, the proud boast has been that Australia 'punches above its weight', both in our international influence and in the performance of our armed forces. There's certainly a strong case for this in the diplomatic arena where we are engaged in everything from the Cairns Group on global agricultural trade reform to the Whale Protection Group within the International Whaling Commission.

Take our involvement with the United Nations (UN) which began when Doc Evatt helped draft the UN Charter before becoming the first president of the General Assembly in 1948. Not only has Australia been a stalwart supporter of the UN since its inception, but we played a key diplomatic role in UN action on Cambodia in the early 1990s and led the UN mandated INTERFET mission to East Timor in 1999. In the latter case, adroit Australian diplomacy saw a diverse and effective multinational force brought together in quick time.

Another area where Australian diplomacy has been particularly active is in promoting arms control. From the 1985 establishment of the Australia Group that coordinates chemical and biological technology exports from thirty-nine nations, through to the Canberra Commission

on the elimination of nuclear weapons and the passing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996, Australia has often taken a leadership role in containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

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*...agile diplomacy secured what many see as the Holy Grail of current Australian foreign policy goals—an invitation to the East Asia Summit.*

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In recent days, agile diplomacy secured what many see as the Holy Grail of current Australian foreign policy goals—an invitation to the East Asia Summit. By reversing our earlier decision not to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, we gained an important diplomatic foothold in Asia at a time when our alliance with the US has never been stronger. In doing so, we proved that we can maintain our traditional western links and be accepted as a member of the emerging Asian community.

But diplomacy has its limits and, like it or not, armed force remains a factor in international affairs in the twenty-first century. So how does Australia rate when the talking stops and the shooting starts? Do we punch above our weight in more than a metaphorical sense?

This comes down to answering two questions. First, does Australia pack a military punch larger than our population and economy would imply? Second, when we employ armed force, do we somehow achieve results beyond what might be reasonably expected, given the forces we have at our disposal? We explore these questions below.

## The weigh-in

There's no unique way to calculate the ratio of a country's 'national weight' to its 'military weight'. In practice, a country's national weight arises from many things, including



Jack Dempsey the Manassa Mauler. © Australian Picture Library

natural resources, geographical location, human resources and physical infrastructure. A country's military weight also depends on many factors, including most especially the detailed structure of its armed forces. And in the final analysis, military capabilities can only really be measured *relative* to prospective threats.

We need to truncate some of these complexities to proceed. What we need are quantities that are easily measured and can be compared between countries. If we're willing to be pragmatic, this turns out not to be so difficult. A country's national weight, at the most aggregated level, is reflected in the size of its population and its economy. Similarly, to a first approximation, military weight is reflected in the number of personnel in the armed forces and the size of the defence budget. This naturally yields two ratios that can be readily compared between

nations: percentage of population in the armed forces, and percentage of GDP spent on defence. It's important to remember that these are both very coarse proxies that ignore a host of complexities.

We begin by looking at population. Table 1 lists the population and number of military personnel in a selection of countries. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, our selection of countries is far from exhaustive. The aim has been to capture most of the larger Asia–Pacific countries, along with a selection of Western European ones (plus Turkey and Israel) that might make a credible claim to being either major or middle powers.

The first point to make is that we have a small population; according to the World Bank, Australia ranked forty-ninth in population in 2003, ahead of Sri Lanka and behind Ghana.

*The sobering fact is that we account for less than one-third of 1% of the world's people.*

We have about one-third the population of the larger European powers and less than one-tenth that of the US. In regional terms, we're just a little smaller than Malaysia, North Korea and Taiwan, but only a quarter the size of Thailand and the Philippines. Indonesia has more than

ten times our population, and we're but a drop in the ocean compared with India and China. The sobering fact is that we account for less than one-third of 1% of the world's people. In population terms, we're a lightweight.

Our permanent armed forces amount to only around 52,000, which puts us near the bottom of the table in our selection of countries. Overall, around sixty-five countries have armed forces numerically superior to ours. As a proportion of population, we have

Table 1: Human resources					
Total population		Permanent armed forces		% of population	
Country	Population '000s	Country	Strength	Country	%
China	1,315,844	China	2,255,000	North Korea	4.92%
India	1,103,371	US	1,433,600	Israel	2.50%
US	298,213	India	1,325,000	Singapore	1.68%
Indonesia	222,781	Russian Federation	1,212,700	South Korea	1.44%
Pakistan	157,935	North Korea	1,106,000	Taiwan	1.35%
Russian Federation	143,202	South Korea	687,700	Russian Federation	0.85%
Japan	128,085	Pakistan	619,000	Turkey	0.70%
Vietnam	84,238	Turkey	514,850	Vietnam	0.57%
Philippines	83,054	Vietnam	484,000	US	0.48%
Germany	82,689	Thailand	306,600	Thailand	0.48%
Turkey	73,193	Indonesia	302,000	Malaysia	0.43%
Thailand	64,233	Taiwan	290,000	France	0.43%
France	60,496	Germany	284,500	Pakistan	0.39%
UK	59,668	France	259,050	Spain	0.35%
Italy	58,093	Japan	239,900	UK	0.35%
South Korea	47,817	UK	207,630	Germany	0.34%
Spain	43,064	Italy	194,000	Italy	0.33%
Canada	32,268	Israel	168,000	Netherlands	0.33%
Malaysia	25,347	Spain	150,700	Sweden	0.31%
North Korea	22,488	Malaysia	110,000	Australia	0.26%
Taiwan	21,500	Philippines	106,000	New Zealand	0.21%
Australia	20,155	Singapore	72,500	Japan	0.19%
Netherlands	16,226	Netherlands	53,130	China	0.17%
Sweden	9,041	Canada	52,300	Canada	0.16%
Israel	6,725	Australia	51,900	Indonesia	0.14%
PNG	5,887	Sweden	27,600	Philippines	0.13%
Singapore	4,326	New Zealand	8,610	India	0.12%
New Zealand	4,028	PNG	3,100	PNG	0.05%

Sources: *UN Population Database* (2004 revision) for year 2005; International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2004–05*.

just over one-quarter of 1% of our population engaged as full-time military personnel. This is significantly less than European nations like the UK (0.35%), Germany (0.34%), France (0.34%) and the Netherlands (0.33%), and even further behind the US (0.48%). In fact, in our selection, the only Western countries we beat are those well-known strategic optimists, Canada and New Zealand (both of which have their strategic approaches covered by more powerful friendly neighbours).

In regional terms, we fall well behind Singapore (1.68%), Malaysia (0.43%) and Thailand (0.48%) but ahead of Japan (0.19%), China (0.17%), Indonesia (0.14%) and the Philippines (0.13%). In general, the trend is that only very populous regional nations devote a smaller proportion of their population to the task of defence than Australia.

Our relatively modest ranking for proportional defence participation needs to be seen in the context of our avowed ‘maritime strategy’, which has driven force development since the early 1970s when the ‘defence of Australia’ doctrine was adopted. In fact, with the exception of a short period in the 1960s that saw conscription boost the Army to over 40,000, Australia has never maintained a large peacetime standing army. As a country with no land borders and no potential adversaries with an amphibious capability, the need to develop a large, manpower-intensive land force is slight.

A similar analysis is possible for economic weight and defence spending. Table 2 lists GDP, defence spending and defence spending as a percentage of GDP for our selection of countries. We’ve used GDP expressed in US\$ calculated at prevailing market exchange rates rather than at purchasing power parity (PPP). This is because the basket of goods and services used to calculate PPP conversion rates is unlikely to reflect the cost of military capability. In any case, the percentage of GDP

spent on defence is unaffected by the choice of conversion factor.

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### *In economic terms, we’re a middleweight.*

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Compared with our population, Australia’s economy ranks much higher in our selection of countries. According to the World Bank, in 2003 Australia ranked thirteenth in the world for GDP at US\$ market exchange rates, and sixteenth using PPP. Not bad for a country that ranks only forty-ninth in population. In economic terms, we’re a middleweight.

Our level of defence spending sees us a little further down the table, with a budget broadly comparable with Turkey, Israel, Canada, Spain and the Netherlands, but far below the heavy hitters like Italy, Germany, the UK, Japan, France and China. Of course, the US remains in a class of its own. Significantly, we outspend all our Southeast Asian neighbours by a comfortable margin. In the world as a whole, we rank fourteenth among nations—about the same place as we do for GDP.

In defence spending as a percentage of GDP, Australia slips a few ranks. We spend a share of our national wealth similar to Italy and Sweden, and significantly more than the Netherlands (1.6%), Germany (1.5%), Spain (1.2%), Canada (1.2%) and Japan (1.0%). The only fully developed Western countries to spend more are the US (3.7%), France (2.6%) and the UK (2.4%). It seems that there are dues to be paid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Closer to home, we devote a smaller share of GDP than Vietnam (7.4%), China (3.9%), Indonesia (3.1%), India (2.6%), South Korea (2.4%), Malaysia (2.3%) and Taiwan (2.3%), but more than Thailand (1.4%) and the Philippines (1.0%). Not surprisingly, we rank ahead of New Zealand (1.5%) and Canada (1.2%).

Table 2 Economic resources

2003 GDP		2003 defence budget		% GDP	
Country	US\$ billion	Country	US\$ billion	Country	%
US	10,948,547	US	404,920	North Korea	17.8%
Japan	4,300,858	China	55,948	Israel	9.4%
Germany	2,403,160	France	45,695	Vietnam	7.4%
UK	1,794,878	Japan	42,835	Singapore	5.2%
France	1,757,613	UK	42,782	Russian Federation	4.9%
Italy	1,468,314	Germany	35,145	Turkey	4.8%
China	1,417,000	Italy	27,751	China	3.9%
Canada	856,523	Russian Federation	21,210	Pakistan	3.8%
Spain	838,652	India	15,508	US	3.7%
South Korea	605,331	South Korea	14,632	Indonesia	3.1%
India	600,637	Turkey	11,649	France	2.6%
Australia	522,378	Israel	10,325	India	2.6%
Netherlands	511,502	Canada	10,118	South Korea	2.4%
Russian Federation	432,855	Spain	9,944	UK	2.4%
Sweden	301,606	Australia	9,925	Malaysia	2.3%
Taiwan	286,400	Netherlands	8,256	Taiwan	2.3%
Turkey	240,376	Taiwan	6,632	Australia	1.9%
Indonesia	208,312	Indonesia	6,443	Italy	1.9%
Thailand	142,953	Sweden	5,532	Sweden	1.8%
Israel	110,227	North Korea	5,500	Netherlands	1.6%
Malaysia	103,737	Singapore	4,741	New Zealand	1.5%
Singapore	91,342	Pakistan	3,129	Germany	1.5%
Pakistan	82,324	Vietnam	2,901	Thailand	1.4%
Philippines	80,574	Malaysia	2,412	Spain	1.2%
New Zealand	79,572	Thailand	1,931	Canada	1.2%
Vietnam	39,164	New Zealand	1,171	Japan	1.0%
North Korea	30,880	Philippines	783	Philippines	1.0%
PNG	3,182	PNG	19	PNG	0.6%

Source: *World Bank* website; International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2004–05*.  
Note: Data for Russian Federation and North Korea are suspect.

To summarise, we spend a greater proportion of GDP on defence than most developed Western nations (the exceptions being permanent members of the UN Security Council), but a smaller proportion than most of our significant regional neighbours. This probably reflects two things: first, the synergy derived from collective defence in Western Europe; and second, the reality that our regional neighbours are still developing economically, and therefore have to spend more to meet the demands of what

is, in many ways, a more challenging strategic environment than that faced by Western Europe.

The judges’ verdict

On the basis of the data collected here, there’s nothing to suggest that we possess a military capability larger than would be expected from the size of our population and economy. If anything, we’re light on when it comes to the size of our forces relative to our population (for understandable reasons), and we’re in the



middle of the road when it comes to defence spending as a share of national wealth, noting our position as a developed economy on the periphery of Asia.

This judgment is made subject to the earlier caveats about the complexity of assessing national and especially military weight. Fortunately, we can turn to an overseas assessment that takes some account of the details of our force structure.

Each year, the Pentagon reports to the US Congress on *'Allied Contributions to the Common Defence'*. The most recent available report dates from July 2003. It includes an extensive discussion of the contributions made by twenty-six allied nations to military operations in the preceding calendar year (in 2002 the focus was naturally on Afghanistan) and a quantitative assessment of each ally's military capacity to contribute armed forces relative to their underlying workforce and economic capacity. While this is a more detailed approach than we have used here, it employs a similar methodology.

The result is a report card for each country marked against eight criteria. Two criteria

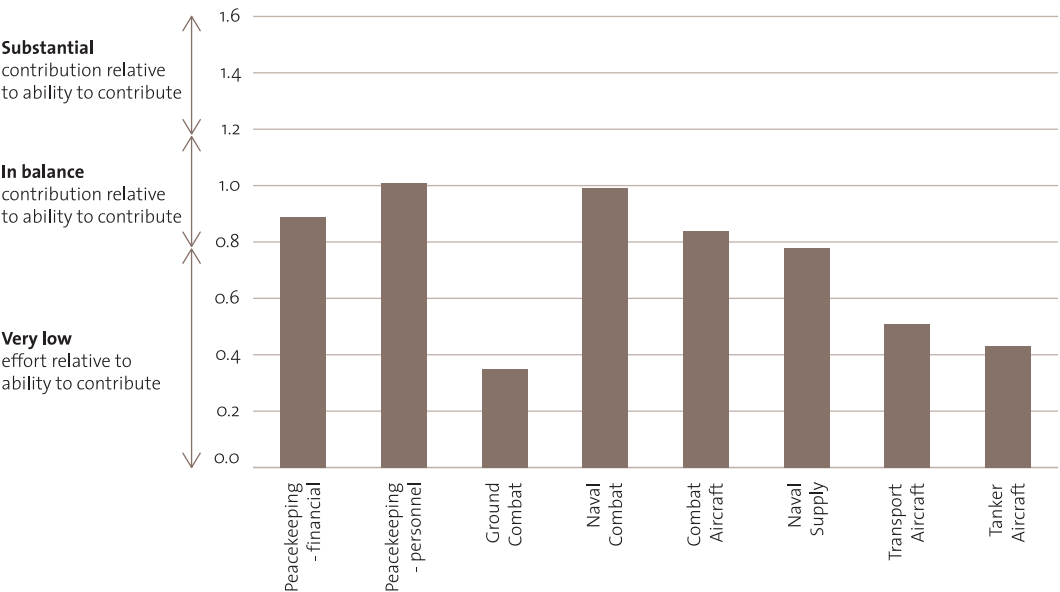
reflect financial and personnel contributions made to multinational peacekeeping in the preceding year, and six criteria rate different components of the country's force structure. Each criterion is graded on a numerical scale with the following meaning:

- 0 to 0.8 indicates 'very low effort relative to ability to contribute'
- 0.8 to 1.19 indicates 'roughly in balance with ability to contribute'
- 1.2 or above indicates 'substantial contributions relative to ability to contribute'.

According to the report, a nation is considered to be doing its *fair share* in a particular category if its share of total contributions is 'in balance' with its share of total GDP or labour force. Figure 1 summarises the Pentagon's assessment of Australia in July 2003.

While we score well for our contribution to multinational peacekeeping (we still had a sizeable contingent in East Timor through 2002 and 2003), the assessment of our force structure is less favourable. In only two areas—naval combat assets and combat

**Figure 1 Australia's report card**



Source: US Department of Defense, *Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defence*, July 2003

aircraft—are we rated as doing our fair share; in the remaining four areas, we’re making a ‘very low effort relative to our ability to contribute’.

Thus, on the basis of our own analysis and that of our main ally, our military capacity represents nothing out of the ordinary compared with our national capacity. If we punch above our weight, it’s not because we’ve devoted any extra resources to being able to do so.

Fight record

Having an armed force isn’t the same as actually using an armed force. Perhaps we punch above our weight by undertaking larger and more frequent operations than our size would imply? This seems at least plausible, given our recent high operational tempo, but a closer examination of the facts casts doubt on the proposition.

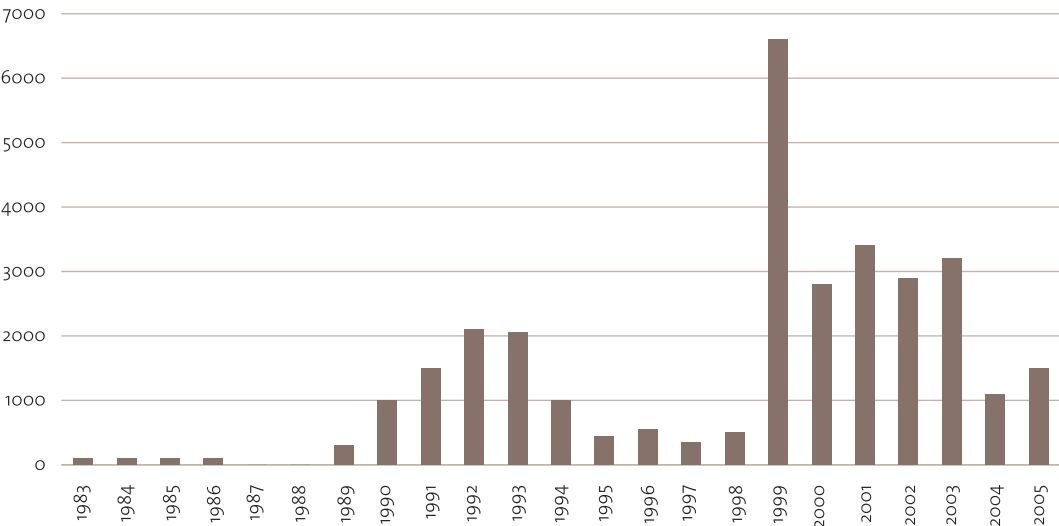
Figure 2 plots the number of ADF personnel deployed on operations between 1983 and 2005. With the exception of the deployment to East Timor in 1999 when the number of personnel on operations exceeded 13% of the permanent force, the fraction of the force deployed has remained below 7%—even during the period

covering deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq and Solomon Islands between 2001 and 2003. This means that only one in fourteen members of the permanent ADF was actually deployed on operations at any one time during that period. And this is before any account is taken of the more than 20,000 reserve force members available to augment the permanent force.

*Even small deployments disrupt training and the posting cycle, and the rigours of operational deployments place a very heavy burden on individuals and their families.*

That’s not to say that the recent high operational tempo has not posed difficulties for the ADF. Even small deployments disrupt training and the posting cycle, and the rigours of operational deployments place a very heavy burden on individuals and their families. But this is true for all militaries, not just the ADF. Indeed, the UK and US have been forced to make much more extensive use of their reserve forces, and tours of duty are sometimes more than twice as long as those of ADF personnel.

Figure 2 ADF personnel on operational deployments, 1983–2005



Sources: Report of the Strategic Workforce Planning Review, 2003; Defence annual report 2003–04.



So how does the scale of our operational deployments compare with that of other countries? The best available data we have comes from the ongoing conflict in Iraq. Table 3 lists the contribution of the four Coalition members that took an active role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It's immediately clear that the proportions of troops deployed to Iraq by the US (31.3%) and the UK (19.2%) dwarf the proportion that we sent to Iraq (4.0%) or even the total (about 7.0%) once East Timor and other concurrent deployments are taken into account.

The same is true for the stabilisation phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Table 4 lists the countries with more than a hundred personnel deployed to Iraq or the immediate region as at August 2005. Not surprisingly, the US (9.7%) and the UK (5.6%) are among those making the largest commitments as a fraction of available permanent force (as well as in absolute terms) while Latvia and Georgia score strongly because they maintain very small permanent forces. Australia falls into the

second tranche of coalition members, with less than 3% of our permanent force deployed.

In Afghanistan the situation is not that different. Our contribution of 0.37% of our permanent force (190 personnel) is similar to many other contributing nations including Germany (0.64%), Netherlands (0.59%), Denmark (0.54%), Hungary (0.48%), Spain (0.37%), France (0.29%), Italy (0.25%) and the United Kingdom (0.22%). Only Canada (1.9%), Belgium (1.5%), the US (1.3%) and Norway (1.2%) have dispatched more than 1% of their military personnel to Afghanistan. Thus, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the scale of our military contribution has been unexceptional.

### It's the size of the fight in the dog, not the ...

The final possibility is that we 'punch above our weight' because, unit for unit, the ADF achieves more militarily than comparable armed forces. If this is true, it can't be the result of having state-of-the-art equipment. Almost every major platform in the ADF is

**Table 3** The 2003 Iraq War, combat phase

Country	Deployed	Strength	% deployed
US	446,985	1,427,000	31.3
UK	40,906	212,600	19.2
Australia	2,050	51,900	4.0
Canada	31	52,300	0.1

Source: Anthony Cordesman, *The Iraq War*, CSIS, 2003

**Table 4** Iraq, stabilisation phase, August 2005

Country	% force deployed	Country	% force deployed	Country	% force deployed
US	9.7%	Italy	1.7%	Slovakia	0.5%
Latvia	7.8%	Mongolia	1.5%	South Korea	0.4%
United Kingdom	5.6%	Lithuania	0.9%	Japan	0.3%
Georgia	4.9%	Poland	0.9%	Ukraine	0.3%
Australia	2.6%	Romania	0.9%	Azerbaijan	0.2%
El Salvador	2.5%	Bulgaria	0.8%		
Denmark	2.4%	Albania	0.6%		

Source: Brookings Institution 'Iraq Index' and *Global Strategy* website.

either being upgraded or is scheduled to be upgraded in the near future, in most cases because of significant capability gaps.

This leaves the individual and collective prowess of the men and women of the ADF. No one would disagree with the Defence Minister's observation, in the 2004 Defence publication *Winning in Peace, Winning in War: The ADF's Contribution to the Global Security Environment*, that 'Our military men and women have established a superb reputation as a force to be reckoned with, able to mount complex military operations in the face of grave risk, and mount complex humanitarian operations with just hours of notice.' But to say that we have been 'punching above our weight' implies that the ADF can undertake such operations more effectively than comparable militaries, including those of our allies.

Such comparisons are problematic. The fact is, we've chosen our fights very carefully (like any good boxer). Unlike the UK and the US, we didn't contribute conventional land forces to the Iraq invasion and we've played a carefully circumscribed role in the dangerous stabilisation phase. It would simply be inappropriate to brag about 'punching above our weight' while others in the Coalition continue to stand toe to toe with insurgents, slugging it out in the Sunni triangle at great cost.

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*...no matter how you look at it, from a military perspective we're a middle power behaving like a middle power.*

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So no matter how you look at it, from a military perspective we're a middle power behaving like a middle power. Our military capacity broadly accords with our population and economic weight, and we use that capacity on an unexceptional scale, which is proportionately somewhat smaller than our key Anglo allies.

## Are we pulling our weight?

Comparing Australia's contributions to Iraq and Afghanistan with those of the US and UK, the question becomes not whether we are punching above our weight, but rather, whether we are pulling our weight. Not only do we devote a smaller share of our national resources to our armed forces, but we've also devoted a far smaller proportion of the forces we do have to recent coalition operations.

The first point to make is that recent deployments largely accord with the government's stated policy. Indeed, the 2000 Defence White Paper placed careful limits on the sorts of contributions we might make to operations beyond our region:

*'Beyond the Asia Pacific region we would normally consider only a relatively modest contribution to any wider UN or US-led coalition, proportionate to our interests and the commitments of contributors from elsewhere in the world.'*

While the 2003 Strategic Update went so far as to draw the line at important niche contributions:

*'...involvement in coalition operations is likely to be of the type witnessed in Afghanistan, and which the Government has considered in Iraq if necessary - that is, limited to the provision of important niche capabilities.'*

If anything, the dispatch of 450 troops to Al Muthanna province in Iraq goes a little beyond what is usually understood as a 'niche' contribution. That is, contributions of high military value that augment or complement the main coalition force, and entail a manageably low risk of casualties. Past examples include surface combatants, SAS squadrons, medical units, clearance diver teams, and penny packets of transport, maritime patrol, and fighter aircraft. The rationale behind this approach is that it's the political fact of our contribution, rather

than its size and composition, that ultimately matters. In the case of Iraq—which enjoyed far from universal support—the key point is arguably that we played an active role when few others would.

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Ultimately, the real test of whether we pull our weight as an international citizen is not the scale of forces we send to far flung conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan, but rather, the extent to which we fulfil our more exclusive responsibilities closer to home. There is no doubt that we did exactly that in 1999, when we provided the largest contingent to the international force we led into East Timor. Moreover, it's telling to look at the relatively small contributions that both the US and UK made on the ground in that operation—both were smaller than that of our near neighbour New Zealand. In fact, the US deployment had all the characteristics of what we would call a niche contribution (although they did hold a reserve off shore). Viewed this way, the forces we have provided to coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq compare well with the sorts of contributions we received from the northern hemisphere during East Timor. Despite claims to the contrary, proximity still plays a big role in determining national interests—even in the new globalised security environment.

In any case, all signs are that the policy of making carefully calibrated niche contributions to coalition operations has served us very well indeed. Our alliance with the US is stronger than ever, we've managed to keep our casualties down to an

extraordinary minimum, and we've picked up a free trade deal with the US in the process. Even from a fiscal perspective, the cost has been slight; less than \$2 billion dollars spread over four years. From this author's perspective, it's hard to see what more we could expect, or want, to achieve. We've discharged our responsibilities and gained a substantial benefit at what has—so far—been a modest cost in blood and treasure.

### Beyond niche contributions

Some analysts disagree with the notion of niche contributions, arguing that we need to be able to make more substantial contributions to coalition operations. In fact, it's argued that we need to do the one thing we've avoided since Vietnam; make a conventional land force contribution to the combat phase of a coalition operation. Consistent with this, Army's ongoing campaign to become 'networked and hardened' includes, among other things, the goal of being capable of medium intensity warfighting in a coalition setting.

The argument for going beyond niche contributions to coalition operations is twofold. First, in the new security environment our national interests can be vitally engaged anywhere around the globe. Second, membership of the US alliance demands it. While there are counterarguments against both these propositions, one thing is clear; with the US military at full stretch, it is land forces that are needed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not just in relatively benign areas like Al Muthanna, but in the tempest of central Iraq where security is yet to be established.

But making a substantial ground contribution is easier said than done. The Australian Army is a boutique affair – highly trained and professional but small and, in general, poorly equipped for the rigours of medium intensity combined arms combat. Nonetheless,

we could provide a battalion to work under the command of, for example, a larger UK contingent within a coalition just as we did during the Korean conflict in the early 1950s, and which we are doing on a smaller scale with our contingent in southern Iraq today.

Alternatively, with a moderate boost in troop numbers and some additional investment, we could deploy a full-size brigade task force comprising three battalions plus supporting elements. This would have the advantage of allowing much more autonomous national Australian command. This was the model employed in Vietnam where we had our own area of operations. But short of a major expansion of the Army, this would be a one-shot option that could not be sustained past the first six to twelve month tour of duty. Yet, even with this limitation, it would be of more than just political value. The post Cold War US Army is currently sustaining only twelve deployed regular combat brigades including ten in Iraq, one in South Korea and one in Afghanistan. An extra brigade on the ground in Iraq, or especially Afghanistan, would be a substantial contribution by any measure.

However, such a large commitment to a coalition operation would leave the cupboard worryingly bare at home. If a problem arose close by, say in the arc of instability, our national interest would be engaged to an extent shared by few others. The problem would be largely ours to deal with as in East Timor in 1999. Deciding not to hold adequate forces ready for such contingencies would be a serious decision indeed. And irrespective of that, it would be difficult to convince the electorate that we need to develop the capacity for larger and riskier contributions to coalition operations. While the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are serious, our interests are nowhere nearly as directly engaged as in the era of forward defence when communism threatened to knock over the dominos to our north.

## Prospects

There are other ways to increase our strategic weight aside from making larger land contributions to coalition operations. We could, for example, boost our maritime capability by building extra submarines. But, aside from the modernisation of the ADF already set out in the government's five-year-old Defence Capability Plan, a further expansion of any sort seems unlikely.

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Of course, with defence spending below two percent of GDP there's no *economic* reason why Australia cannot have a larger military force. A mere one percent increase in Commonwealth receipts would fund a twelve percent boost to Defence spending. Or, more tangibly, it would cost each taxpayer only \$8.40 a week to raise Defence spending by twenty-five percent. Yet the lure of a proverbial 'sandwich and milkshake' remains strong. So strong, that few politicians have suggested increasing defence spending beyond what's necessary to deliver current plans.

In fact, in 2003, when faced with the rising cost of both new equipment and recurrent operating costs, the government deferred investment within the existing funding envelope and made cuts to the force structure to partially offset rising operating costs. With the government hesitant to provide extra money to maintain their existing plans, it's unlikely that additional funds will become available any time soon for a significant expansion. And even if funds were

forthcoming, it remains to be seen whether ADF recruitment and retention would allow an expansion in personnel numbers.

Chances are that we'll continue to play the role of middle-power as we have in recent years: by carefully marshalling our resources to maximum effect in support of global security interests and the alliance, while developing and maintaining the self-reliant capability for operations closer to home where our interests can be vitally and uniquely engaged.

### Further Reading

An examination of Australia's overall position and future prospects appears in 'Punching above our Weight' by Paul Kelly in *Policy*, vol. 20, no. 2, Winter 2004.

Chief of Army's vision for a networked and hardened Army is contained in *Complex Warfighting* available at [www.defence.gov.au/lwsc/](http://www.defence.gov.au/lwsc/).

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### About the Author

Prior to joining ASPI, **Mark Thomson** held a number of positions in Defence working in the areas of capability development and resource management. In 1999 he was Political Military Adviser to Major General Peter Cosgrove during the INTERFET operation. Prior to his time with Defence, Mark held a series of academic research and teaching positions in theoretical physics.

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