

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

Army's capability

Plan Beersheba, which is designing Army's contribution to Australia's future defence force, remains a work in progress, necessitated in part by cuts to Defence in the May budget. While strategic guidance calls on Army to sustain a brigade group and a separate battalion group on operations indefinitely, it will now only be able to provide a brigade group; its tanks are to be mothballed; and it will purchase towed howitzers rather than self-propelled ones.

On present indications, the standard multi-purpose infantry brigade group will be an integrated Regular and Reserve formation consisting of:

- a headquarters and a brigade signals squadron;
- three infantry battalions, each of three rifle companies – one of the battalions will be a composite drawn from several Army Reserve units;
- a regiment of medium artillery – 155mm towed howitzers;
- a combat engineer regiment;
- a combat services support battalion, including a transport squadron probably equipped with Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles; and, possibly
- an armoured unit headquarters commanding an armoured reconnaissance squadron (wheeled light armoured vehicles) and an armoured personnel carrier squadron (M113s).

Whether such a formation would be suitable for warfighting on its own in our neighbourhood remains, at best, moot. It has the potential, though, to disperse up to four semi-independent, unit-sized 'battle groups' or may be ten sub-unit-sized 'combat teams' on peacekeeping or humanitarian tasks.

There will be three of these brigade groups functioning on a three-year readiness cycle. At any one time, one will be ready for deployment or deployed; another will be preparing to deploy; and the third will be 'resetting' following deployment. In addition, there will be an amphibious battle group (based initially on 2nd Battalion, Royal Australia Regiment) which specialises in operating with Navy's amphibious ships to secure coastline points of entry to an operational area and providing humanitarian/disaster assistance. Finally, Special Operations Command will remain unchanged, with a special air service regiment and two commando regiments (one Army Reserve).

By any measure, this is an extremely modest force and especially so when viewed alongside the military capability elsewhere in our region. Whether it may be regarded as adequate for Australia's defence and security needs over the next two decades depends on the threat assessment and must be resolved by the 2013 Defence White Paper. Already, public comments by our principal ally indicate that the United States regards it as inadequate. The Institute will be examining this question at its 2nd International Dialogue in February.

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¹David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is a vice-president of the Institute. These are his personal views.