SERONG ON REVOLUTIONARY WAR: Oct 1971
An Australian View of Revolutionary War

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The Background to Strategic Policy

For the third time in a hundred years Australia is in the turmoil of re-thinking its strategic posture. The 1870s saw the Russian invasion scare—the port cities’ defences facing with coast artillery and volunteer field forces raised to replace the British regiments departed 15 years before the Crimean War, never to return. Yet even these were raised and deployed in the context of defence of the ports; for the ports were the bases of the Fleet—the Royal Navy. And the Navy was the ultimate defence.

This fact alone has dominated Australia’s strategic policy formulation for generations. The Navy (British) was remote and therefore not unpopular. The contact element—the Redcoats (also British)—were feared as the ultimate economic weapon of government—itself still suspiciously regarded as the tool of entrenched British privilege. There was merit on each side of the dialogue. The major companies—pastoral and other—were for the most part London-based; naturally, having regard to the colony’s short history. Britain itself had scarcely recovered from the emotional impact of American Independence—history marched slowly in those days—and was not about to see that performance repeated. And for the colonists, the most memorable use of land-based military force was the action at Eureka Stockade in 1854 when the Redcoats attacked the citadel of the rebellious Ballarat miners. With the citizen majority, established regular army elements were unpopular.

This was the emotional climate at the turn of the century, the date of Federation. The regular armed forces of the new Commonwealth would be Navy only—who ever sailed a ship up Bourke Street? Not even Marines would be permitted. And the regular army would be restricted to invisible and essential coast artillery—invisible in their distant fortresses; essential because the Navy needed them to cover its ships while they refitted. All other army elements would be citizen militia. The sons of Eureka were feeling their oats, supported by the confidence that a British Parliament that had conferred virtual independence would continue to exercise protection without embarrassing this new nationalism by flaunting its apparatus. A political dream world was beginning to take shape.

In that shape, Australia entered the Boer War. No great test of anything. The British Navy took care of the troop transport. The cavalry regiments operated with great credit under British tactical control. The rallying cry was a well-founded and effective imperial emotionalism. Scarcely a man in government possessed the strategic maturity to conceive that the real purpose of the operation was to maintain an essential way station on the sea-road to India—and Australia. A dozen or so years later, with World War I and the Germans, maturity was developing. With no change in the internal posture, there was at least the sense to accept pre-planned responsibility for what became, then, and in World War II (Germans again), Australia’s strategic role—to move in fast and help secure the Suez Canal—by now become the Empire’s jugular. Still no regular field troops. Still in the shelter of the British Navy—Australian-augmented, it is true, but essentially British.

It should be observed at this point that in the periods of preliminary tension prior to both wars, the Federal government was conservative. They determined the degree of participation in planning and preparation. But, in each case, the war itself was finally conducted by an
incoming Labour (Socialist) government, or a national government of strong Labour content, giving rise to the saying—axiom or myth?—that only a Labour government can manage Australia at war. “Manage”, in the context of World War II, meant keeping the trade unions quiet—a political achievement that got a notable boost with the German invasion of Russia, and later from the naked fear in some elements of the civilian population when the Japanese occupied New Guinea.

Management was further simplified by the simplistic emotional climate of the day which carried on the tradition by which Australian expeditionary forces consisted entirely of volunteers—an arrangement which made for superb fighting material, and left the somewhat less superb happy in their factories, or drafted for home defence in the militia. Late in the war, after severe American pressure, the line of this political philosophy was dented, though not breached, with the concession by the Labour government that draftees would be engaged in combat in the islands against the Japanese.

Since those days, the Royal Navy has disappeared from the Pacific. For a time, it was replaced by the Navy of the United States. And now that, apparently, is going. Australia, an enclave of European culture, stands alone in the geography of South-East Asia. The old enemies are gone; the old friends are gone. The old strategies are no longer relevant. Sensing this uneasily, as early as 1949, the internal posture changed—grudgingly, gingerly. Part of the momentum developed during World War II was permitted to continue. Defence industries survived; and with them a modest field force, acceptance of which was eased by its long-term participation in the occupation of Japan; out of sight, it was out of mind and no threat to the unions; and by subsequent evidence of utility with its Korea deployment. It gave the only meaningful substance to the voices of a new generation of politicians newly conscious of an evolving role in world affairs. In fact, in this new world where friends were few and distant, the small field force was the only card in Australia's hand.

With the establishment of Mao in Peking, and the rash of Communist insurgencies throughout South-East Asia, maturity came closer. With most of the field force absent in Korea, and a worrisome internal security situation worsening in Malaya—then still regarded in Canberra as the forward bastion of Australia's defences, however differently it may have been viewed from London—there was taken the unprecedented peace-time step of drafting male youth for full-time military training and subsequent home service in the citizen militia. So was maintained a continental defence structure of sorts while the field force was abroad. The arrangement continued through the absence of the field force in Malaya. Both of these expeditions, be it noted, contained no draftees. They did, however, produce trade union trouble, and instances occurred from time to time of waterside workers refusing to handle cargoes of military items destined for use against Communists—either regular or insurgent. These were handled with minimal dislocation by the use of military personnel—as substitute workers—not quite the form of strike-breaking feared by the founding fathers of the Labour movement, but equally effective and unwelcome. The Korea and Malaya operations ended, and so did the draft.

Malaya, however, had introduced another element. By now, with changes in strategic emphasis in Europe, Australia's role had changed. In 1954 the decision was taken to abandon the primary role of desert warfare, and the primary aim of protecting the Suez Canal, in favour of a role on the mainland of South-East Asia in association with regional allies. This was first conceived as intervention in tropical theatre combat with conventional organisations and methods against conventional enemies. In practice, it proved to be intervention in internal security operations against Communist insurgents, externally supported. First Malaya; then Vietnam; with a situation in Borneo superimposed briefly on the latter.

Vietnam brought back the draft, occasional trouble with the watersiders, and, for the first time since the very limited exercise at the end of World War II, the employment of draftees in overseas combat. By now the draft was making a major contribution to the manpower of regular combat units, and to home-based elements as well. A defence industry base was well established, and Australia held all the essential elements in the spectrum of defence operations. The range
was complete. The quality was excellent. The quantity, however, was another matter. Suf-
ficiency, even in the present context, is five years away.

Vietnam has brought its internal problems—relatively minor compared with the corre-
spending outbursts in the United States. Whether this is an expression of a different na-
tional character, or of proximity to the heat, is still conjectural. Perhaps a degree of both. Perhaps the
latter shapes the former. Now, with the operation and the commitment reducing to proximate
zero, it is bringing a reappraisal of the quality of Australia’s alliances; particularly of the major
ally—the United States. This reappraisal provides little basis for confidence.

The View to the North

From Japan to Iran there are 23 Asian countries. Of these, 16 are involved in some degree
of armed conflict, most of it inspired and sustained by Peking. The populations of the involved
16, at 1·8 billion, are more than half the world’s 3·5. Of the seven that are technically free of
conflict, the degree is in doubt. Only the tiny Maldives appear to be completely quiet. Japan
and Singapore have continuing tensions; in Bhutan and Nepal, peace is absolutely dependent
upon their giant neighbours; Mongolia’s Chinese community of migrant workers may yet be
heard from; Afghanistan is a query (and Pakistan has the dominant conflict over “Push-
tunistan”).

Vietnam has dominated the news for so long, in association with its former sister-States of
Indo-China, that one tends to overlook the problems of other nations in the area. And yet,
this is the region in which Australia’s lot is cast; in which her fate will be decided. Let us run
through the troubled 16, in thumbnail sketch:

**CHINA—Taipei and Peking**: Sporadic shelling of the Nationalists’ offshore islands. Com-
mando raids by Taipei against the mainland coast opposite. Continuing US naval support
for Taipei. Meanwhile, China is embroiled in a series of border incidents with Russia which
have caused major troop deployments by both Powers; and in Tibet the revolt of the Khamba
tribesmen may not be finally crushed.

**VIETNAM—North and South**: Hanoi and Saigon are still at war, with the action now sub-
stantially moved to the north of South Vietnam, but no sign of a negotiated peace. Here, the
US is pulling out, its job done for Saigon. Australia, too, is reverting to what might be called
a Civic Action and Training posture—the shape of things to come.

**KOREA—North and South**: Naval actions; commando raids; continuing threats by North
against South. US support for Seoul reduced but continuing.

**LAOS**: This “neutral” nation is not only a buffer, but, agreements regardless, a very active
combat zone, and likely to remain so.

**CAMBODIA**: Now occupied by Hanoi troops in its north-east quarter, and subject to
guerrilla operations over much of its remaining area. It is still a forward base for Hanoi opera-
tions against South Vietnam.

**MALAYSIA**: Communists, holed up for years across the border in Thailand, are active
again after their 1960 defeat. Small-scale, but significant. Civil disturbance between Chinese
and Malay communities in urban areas.

**BURMA**: Seven separate insurgencies—two Communist, five ethnic minority—proceeding
simultaneously; with former Premier U Nu now trying to co-ordinate them.

**INDONESIA**: Sustained major efforts by the Djakarta government to root out the Com-
munist infrastructure, along with a continuing problem among ethnic minorities in the out-
lying islands.

**PAKISTAN**: The long trouble with India over Kashmir is now compounded by the inter-
ceine strife between East and West, which has, for the time at least, deprived the nation of
any external effectiveness.
**INDIA:** Trouble with the Nagas and Mizos in the north-east. Worry about a fresh China incursion in the same area. Overflow from East Pakistan; and a continuing watch in Kashmir. Armed rebellious Communists in West Bengal. And several individual States ripe for separation.

**CEYLON:** Student revolt by frustrated Maoists against their own leftist government.

**THAILAND:** China-supported insurgency in the north; Hanoi-supported insurgency in the north-east; and Malaysia’s Communists in the south.

**PHILIPPINES:** Maoist movement in central Luzon.

That is the view from Canberra. It is not a pretty sight.

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**The Prospect**

Australians enter the ’70s and the evolving drama of Asia uncertain whether to be spectators or participants. There is the understandable bi-polar dichotomy in political presentation, based rather on the need to hold and display a marketable position than on any genuine conviction as to the position’s intrinsic merits. In their extremes, the positions are “Fortress Australia” (Labour): and Forward Defence (Liberal). Both extremes are negotiable by all except party fanatics; and the real question becomes, “How much Fortress; and how much Forward?”

However, as political philosophies which translate into strategies, one or other must prevail. The country cannot be half-Forward, half Fortress. Any significant degree of one or the other (and half is significant) carries with it the associated economic policies. These evoke the supporting diplomatic policies, which in turn come around in circular fashion to supporting military strategy. Half would have us between two stools without the means to express either proposition adequately.

The attitude of the Fortress element is simple and can be covered in short order: Revolutionary War, wherever occurring offshore, is the business of its domestic warriors. Put up the shutters, guard from splash and reject any suggestion that it may be a manifestation of an externally directed or influenced strategy of which Australia may be an eventual victim. As this policy calls for no action beyond possibly strengthening the continental defences it needs no further comment here except to note that, in the climate of the day, an era of “undeclared” wars, one can expect its proponents to attempt to erode the Forward operation, even where it is in combat. On the other hand, the nature of the Fortress operation is such that corresponding action by its opponents is not practicable. This review will consequently address itself to the problem, internal and external, as seen by the Forward proponents.

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**The National Interest**

What is the national interest? In these days of fewer monarchies, and hence of non-subjective approaches to international relationships, the national interest of a “have” nation is somewhat difficult to define. For the “have-not” it is easy—to become a “have”. For the “have”, presumably it is to hold on to what it has, and enjoy it. Unfortunately, such a concept of national interest involves a static posture; and no strategist has yet discovered how to maintain a static national posture—least of all the United States, which has led the developed world into that position. It is like riding a bicycle: forward momentum is an essential element in stability. If it does not exist from a natural progress towards a proper, clear and obvious aim, such an aim must be artificially contrived.

That is Australia’s dilemma. It is in a “between” status. It cannot launch an Apollo; nor does it need to stimulate protection of the ecology, or removal of ghettos. A rich, happy land. Perhaps too rich, too happy. Where is the challenge? Where indeed! No borders; no neighbours; no incidents. Therefore, no stimulus; no reflexes; no posture of readiness adopted from ingrained, age-long custom.
Small wonder then that the average Australian’s views of revolutionary war is “Ho Hum”. It becomes more active when he is concerned, either with a friend or relative directly involved, with the possibility of the draft for himself, or with some other personal commitment, however arrived at. Most of this concern lasts only for the duration of his personal connection. If he is a student, for a year or two; if a politician, he may make a career of it. Enduring concern and significant views, however, are to be found only in the military and diplomatic communities. And they diverge—the diplomats to the left, and the military to the right. Left or right, neither element is significantly represented in the Fortress group—their career interests dictate otherwise. The difference is as to method, with each element leaning understandably to its own area of expertise. To the diplomat, the field forces should be left in Australia until the situation explodes beneath him. Then call in the troops. To the soldier, forward military presence is not only the best insurance that it will not be needed, but also if need does come, it can be used quickest and therefore to the best advantage. Behind all the arrayed logic of both arguments there is a great deal of very understandable human nature at play. Our diplomats, new to the game, have yet to achieve the professional maturity which sees ambassador and commander complementing each other to mutual advantage—a technique so ably displayed by the more mature British. And our commanders are no less deficient in this area. We have a lot of growing up to do.

Why all this? We must establish how we see it, because from that inevitably comes what we do about it. How we see it, at this time, is confused. And what we do about it, if decisions are made now, is likely to be equally confused. This is a bad time for decisions—but who can say when the glass will clear?

What Do We See?

On our left, Russia is now beginning to cross the Indian Ocean in an effort to encircle China from the South, awaiting only the reopening of the Suez Canal for developing that operation. To the North, China, blocked temporarily in its thrust to control South and Southeast Asia; locked in its struggle with Russia from which Australia may stand aloof, but by which it can hardly be unaffected. Japan, its new great trading partner, itself concerned with shaping a commercial hegemony in the areas which are now the zone of competition between China and Russia. Britain withdrawn. America withdrawing. The raw nakedness of 1942 over again, but in a new political context. Behind is nothing—the South Pacific and Antarctica. No place to go. If Australia is to have depth for its strategy it can only come by operating forward of the northern shores.

“Forward” for the present means “on the mainland of South-East Asia”, where a military presence is maintained—one battalion in Malaysia, formerly three, and now phasing out. Air, Navy, logistic and headquarters components are in both areas. The employment—and indeed the deployment—of these forces is a matter of continuing debate between the rival political factions, with the Labour element threatening complete and immediate withdrawal of both forces on assumption of office. This, in the long-existing close balance of the rival parties, makes Australia an unreliable partner in any regional agreement; not least since the efforts of the “ins” to de-fuse the “outs” tends towards a “me-too” position, the argument resting on degree rather than principle.

The action is understandable only when seen in its complete context. Briefly, Japan is rising and on the way to becoming the world’s second economic Power, and potentially its second military Power. It is uncommitted, and its resources are deployable with much greater flexibility than those of the United States, Russia or China, which have existing commitments imposed by history and geography. Japan, however, depends upon Middle East oil. Without this oil it is dead. The supply line runs through Indonesia. A foreign Power in control of
Indonesia could virtually dictate terms to Japan. A foreign Power controlling Japan could dictate to the world. Russia and China both see this. The United States is vaguely beginning to realise it. Australia has already been alerted, and is confused in its response.

Russia and China are racing for Indonesia. That is what the Indian Ocean ploy is about; and that is what the Vietnam war is about. Russia is diverting China's strategic resources by operations in the North, while its real run is being made around South Asia. Naval penetration does not mean simply ships. It means a parallel political presence on the adjacent coasts; and Russia is forging that in purposeful fashion—note the operations in Ceylon, India and Malaysia. China, committed in the North, is powerless to intervene militarily; it is forced to direct its considerable efforts to promoting subversion. Russia, paradoxically, finds itself, at least outwardly, in support of the existing orders (which does not rule out clandestine subversion).

Australia's position is “a plague on both houses”; support for the existing orders, and a turning of the blind eye to the Russian diplomatic presence and developing mercantile influence, while deploying and reacting against the naval presence; trade with Red China; and, very recently, United Nations membership for Peking no longer opposed, if achieved in the context of a Two Chinas policy (that is, with Taiwan as well as China represented).

Japan's position is studiously unstated. Unlike most democracies, which nowadays display an almost psychopathic readiness to react to media-provoking—often inspired by interested foreign elements—it has refused to block itself progressively and gratuitously into any position by unnecessary public statements. Japan says nothing. That is wise. Meanwhile, its factories consume the primary products of the region, and of these, the Australian metal ores are vital.

Australia therefore sees itself committed to sustaining an evolving system which has not yet been codified in any formal alliances—military or otherwise: Japan's furnaces must be fed, to continue Australia's prosperity—“national interest”, by definition. But the furnace-feeding alone is not enough. Oil lines must be protected and soft imports—cattle feed grains and textile basics most particularly—must also be assured at source and in transit. These come from and through South-East Asia. Japan cannot yet protect them itself. And so, in one of history's most extraordinary twists, Australia finds itself contributing to the defence of the growing Japanese commercial hegemony as an essential element in the preservation of Australia's own present and future vital interests. One could wish that this were clearly understood in the circles of political confrontation and policy formulation. At this stage, however, it is only vaguely grasped—perhaps more instinctively than intellectually—and the vagueness is reflected in the displayed national posture.

What do we do?

So, Australia in a hazy fashion sees itself committed to the preservation of the status quo in South-East Asia. The form of the commitment has, up to comparatively recently, been simple to rationalise as a SEATO contribution—which indeed it was. And while the contemplated scale and nature of the threat in the SEATO area projected conventional Chinese invasion, this made no waves—internal or external. When, however, the actuality revealed itself—externally supported subversion—Canberra found itself in the grey area of undeclared war, bi-lateral intervention as distinct from SEATO, and a homeland legal dissident minority which could and did take active steps to sabotage the purpose and effect of the overseas deployment.

Australia intervened in Malaya, at the request of the British, in an internal security situation—supporting a British government. It intervened in Vietnam, at the request of South Vietnam and the United States, entering an internal security situation. It intervened in Borneo at the request of the new local Malaysian government when its borders were breached by Sukarno-
inspired overseas Chinese—again internal security. But since then Australia has made public
and inter-governmental statements that certain troops, currently deployed abroad, could not
be considered as available for local internal security operations. This is the current position. It
is designed to avoid precipitate involvement in purely internal disorder, however generated, as
in the Chinese-Malay riots of 1969. It could be assumed, on the analogy of Vietnam, that an
internal security crisis provoked and supported externally would find Australian troops in
support. But who can say for sure? Where are the criteria to measure and define this style of
aggression? At what point does Canberra conclude that the hand of Peking or Hanoi is clearly
revealed? And if, improbably, it be neither Peking nor Hanoi, but Moscow, what then? There
is a lot of room for manoeuvre in Canberra’s present declared position.

All this would be simple if either Britain or America were to remain in the area. They—one
or other—would decide, after the decencies had been acknowledged by a charade of consulta-
tion. We would conform; happy to do so, paying thereby our dues against the later and graver
day of direct menace to our continent. But now, they are going or gone. If we involve ourselves,
we are committed without the strength to assure a satisfactory conclusion. Our allies (actual,
prospective and potential) provide a melange of political and military variety which is no
substitute for the massive command structures within which we have been accustomed to
operate.

If only Japan were ready. If only this were 1981, not 1971. A strong Japan, ready, willing
and able to protect its own interests in the broadest sense would provide the sort of strategic
setting in which Canberra could be comfortable. Australia, one day, may be the America of
South-East Asia; one day may find areas of tension developing between itself and Japan—for
the markets of the region; and for other reasons yet unpredictable. But that is a hundred years
away, and those problems will be the tasks of generations yet unborn. Ours is how to survive in
the 1970s. Problem enough. In this dilemma, one can sympathise with those of the “Forward”
group who lean to the diplomats rather than the generals.

The Lessons

Some light is being cast on the problem by certain lessons which emerge from the Vietnam
and Malaya involvements. In that regard, it should be understood that lessons are for those
who read them. The one incident may provide three different lessons—one for each of three
participants or witnesses. Australia will not read Vietnam as does the United States; nor
Malaya as did Britain. Lessons are for home consumption. Moreover, the significance and
applicability of a lesson vary with changing contexts. Consider the solution of former Soviet
Marshal Zhukov to the problem presented to a central government by a dissident minority:
“We remove the minority.”

Malaya taught techniques. Australians had entered Malaya with a high level of skill in
small-scale combat in jungle. They had learned it against the Japanese in the Islands; con-
firmed it and codified it in post-war training establishments; and wedded it to the internal
security techniques already well established by the British in Malaya. A useful combination.
They learned, essentially, that “the only good counter-insurgency operation is the one that
never had to start”. To explain—there is a progression of operative technique:
1. Deterioration of economic stability; or disappointment of economic expectations.
2. Deterioration of political stability—general, or more probably regional.
3. Police intelligence action—Special Branch.
4. Police political action—arrests of individuals.
5. Police tactical action—against small armed groups.
6. Minor military tactical action—against larger armed groups.
7. Major military tactical action—against an armed, fully organised resistance probably
externally supported.
The Armies of Asia (information courtesy of the Military Balance 1971-72, International Institute for Strategic Studies), London.
Ideally, one avoids the first step. Maintain economic stability, remembering that dissidence normally arises not in the depressed sectors, but in those areas where a degree of prosperity has begun; where expectations have developed and are not met at a desired rate. Hostile external intervention can begin at any stage in the listed sequence. In a country targeted for its strategic significance it may begin before Step 1—to provoke and produce a critical climate. In a country where a pre-existing or potential crisis climate exists, it can normally be expected at Stage 3, when police action has indicated to a resident Communist embassy that there now is in being a movement of dimensions worth encouraging.

At this stage, the central Communist sponsorship—Peking, Moscow or Hanoi—is called upon to exercise a degree of judgement which could be delicate: To support, or not. Support is not automatic. Even the Communist giants have logistic limits. Support of a distant insurgency, far removed from any like-minded neighbour, could produce the same sort of over-extension which, in reverse context, has become the fear obsession of the United States; and which destroyed the French Empire. On the other hand, withholding of support to a comrade in need could have severe psychological effects within an infant regional movement.

Bolivia was a classic example of that dilemma. Fortunately for Moscow, the movement—such as it was—found itself in the hands of Che Guevara. To the small handful of professionals in the business it is a matter of wry amusement that this clown has captured the young-left imagination. His failure was so complete, so thorough and so predictable that the question inevitably arises—"Did he fall, or was he pushed?" Certainly, his greatest services to the movement have been his passing and his memory. It was all rather neat; too neat.

The favoured Communist ploy, and still the most common, is the encouragement of dissident minorities, particularly those elements of ethnic groups which live astride borders—a common enough condition in post-colonial Asia. A demographic fact of life—but one not obvious to distant policy-makers—is that the ethnic group which inhabits one side of a mountain range also commonly inhabits the other. The same for the sides of major rivers. The colonial governments, concerned with clear boundary demarcation, found lines of obvious and enforceable partition on the rivers and watersheds—naturally enough. But the legacy in this post-colonial era is nightmare for the new governments; and a built-in revolutionary situation, ripe for exploitation by the Communists. Australia’s own personal share of that has come up in New Guinea; and this is soon to be handed over, unresolved, to an infant native government.

In defence of the status quo, Australia’s lot seems inevitably cast with the rice-eating lowlanders, who hold the port cities, control the commerce, and receive the legacy of government from the failing hand of the outgoing colonial Powers. It is recognised, with regret, that the up-country ethnic minorities, in many areas and in many respects so much more congenial than their lowland masters, are the natural target for Communist penetration. We see it happening in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Northern India and Cambodia. Vietnam is another story; but there, too, the minorities are exploitable.

In this context, Peking is quite prepared to see—indeed to sponsor—a complete break-up of the nation-States as they now stand. Laos and Cambodia will disappear. Other States based on an ethnic identity will form—temporarily; ultimately to be absorbed as “autonomous regions” or docile satellites into a broad Peking defence/economic structure. We have no answer to this except maintenance of the status quo; though this, if one could be sure that the ruling elites will observe the decencies towards their minorities, is a solution we can live with. Australia’s policy, to the extent that it is defined at all, appears to tend in the direction of helping the established governments to give expression to their constitutional obligations. There could be worse policies.

We have learned that, to avoid the problems of Step 1, we should in our own interests maintain a quantity and quality of economic aid and guidance that will ensure a modest and uniform raising of living standards. No explosions. No inequalities. This may well require local projects to rectify existing inequalities—in medical metaphor, it is the work of the physician. Should this fail to hold the line, as it well may if the dissidence is externally sup-
ported at that stage, we have learned that the next step is to provide support and guidance to the police intelligence apparatus, so that the disident elements can be effectively detected, and neutralised or eliminated with minimum disturbance to the vast majority of the population, who are uncommitted either way. This is minor surgery. It will be accompanied by an appropriate "political warfare" operation, both at home and abroad.

Should this in turn fail, we would consider aid in the form of weapon augmentation to a police element with a tactical capability—a police field force; suitable for platoon-size infantry action against gangs (rural or urban); riot control; and possessing the basic police power of arrest, search and entry—which the military has not.

At this stage, the local government would be concerned with proclaiming Emergency Laws, and framing its attitude to the international Press. We would be involved in advice—in the assumed absence of Britain and the United States. And the development of the aid programme would depend in great measure on the extent to which advice is accepted, modified or rejected. Points of differing outlook are predictable even now. The host country, if it reads Vietnam right, will want to exclude foreign journalists. Australia will want them in. The host government will be keen to apply secret police techniques. Australia will worry about her image by association.

We would be operating, almost certainly, in an Australian mini-version of the Nixon Doctrine, through which we would provide supplies, and perhaps instructors—though this latter provision would have a rough political passage unless they were on the ground earlier—but as yet no field forces. And we would be dedicated to the operational proposition—a reflection of our advice—that the counter-insurgency operation, at whatever stage it reaches, would use the national military component "in aid of the civil power". We will have learned that, however much we like our own systems, it is best to provide the goods and let the locals use them their way, thereby keeping the advisory elements to a minimum.

Now let us advance the scenario, and assume that for whatever reason—increased external support being the most likely—the insurgency continues to grow. We will now be faced with the major lesson of the American Vietnam involvement: if, and how, to intervene with a field force. In this regard, let us not misread the present success of Vietnamisation. It was, and is, a creature of its time. It was practicable and successful from 1969 in the face of a defeated North Vietnam Army. It had no hope in '65, when the South Vietnam Army was battered to its knees. What could we have done then? Put two rifles in the hands of each Viet soldier still on his feet?

The problem of 1965 was not that the United States brought in combat formations. We could say that a Vietnamisation in 1962 would have obviated the need. No argument. But, with the need existing, for whatever reason, the only possible solution then was combat troops. The point at issue is not the decision but the method. We have now learned that if you escalate you must do it in big jumps. The gradual approach, with its apparent political elegance, serves mainly to condition the enemy—as it did in Vietnam. One wonders who was the "enemy". Was the American Administration creeping up on Hanoi, or on its own electorate? Canberra could face the same problem.

Once in with major combat formations, it is a one-way street. There is no way out except forward; meaning that if Canberra sets its hand to the plough it must be assured that it has the home political support, the host-country political support, and the resources to see it through.

Aberrations

The validity and applicability of our view of the "lessons" will probably stand up in the period of concern; but it will be exposed to pressure from some developments that were not in any scenario in the simplistic days of the early 1960s.
Russia. What of Russia? One reason for its presence in the area is to oppose China; and to do so by exercising an effective degree of control over Indonesia; and so over Japan. To the extent that foreign policy is a field for humour, Russia’s situation is almost hilarious—for it could be argued that it can best serve its own ends by defending the status quo, which China is seeking to destroy.

Would Russia collaborate with Australia? Or Australia with Russia? Remember the Russian “mutual security” ploy of mid-1970, launched with an incredible lack of finesse, and received with scarcely less credible foolishness by our own foreign policy managers—an operation which met a rapid and well-earned fate in the departure of the Minister concerned, and explainable only by the anxiety of the External Affairs department, so long in the wilderness, to mount an exciting vehicle on which to ride to a new career destiny. Since then, heads have rolled, and the brief intoxication has subsided. But the germs are still present, and re-infection is not impossible. What may prevent it is the Peking lobby in Australian Labour and intellectual circles—now much stronger than the Russian, and not without a clandestine influence in foreign policy formulation.

Civil Strife and Urban Insurgency. Does that leave Russia on the side of the good guys? Not necessarily. They have another option remaining. It derives from the changing demography in much of the area. The “drift to the cities,” so laboured in the Western Press in the early 1930s, and so little understood, is now happening in South-East Asia. It is partly a function of civil disturbance—some people move to more secure areas; but, more particularly, it is a function of mechanisation of the tools of industry—the buffalo is being replaced by the powered hand-tiller; and the supporting services for this mechanisation are in the district towns. The boats on rivers and canals now have motors, not paddles. The ox-cart has been replaced by the five-ton truck; the pedal-bicycle by the Honda. This is an irreversible trend.

What it means is that the “water” in which Mao’s “fish” swim is drying up. His entire strategy is disintegrating. The countryside can no longer surround the cities, because the people—and it is people that matter—are in the urban groupings. He and his satellite colleagues in their attempt to provoke civil strife are groping for a new strategy of urban insurgency, and they have not yet found it. The security forces of the nations of the area are, correspondingly, groping towards a counter-strategy, and they have not found it. In this field, the Russians, though not far advanced, are ahead. It is not impossible that they see their role as gaining effective control of the cities of the region by manipulated urban turmoil, while Mao is still doing what he can with the peripheral rural elements—ethnic minorities or otherwise.

Development. To the considerable extent to which this problem is not understood—by the nations of the region, the Great Powers, and the not-so-great Powers—the change of demographic emphasis is a source of confusion. Good men with worthy motives plead strongly for the countryside versus the cities; and vice versa. Most of the pleading is on behalf of the rural areas, because world emotion, as usual half a generation behind actuality, is still in the late 1950s; and because Peking, with its solid investment in the rural operations, is reluctant to give up while it thinks it still has a chance—an attitude which will be echoed by its people everywhere; overt and covert.

So there is a chance for Russia to make a play for domination through the cities. Not a good chance—the status quo would be a better play; and not one that suits their style—the Russians are not fools, and are hardly likely to involve themselves in a major operation, a race against time, in a medium in which they are less than expert. What could emerge is a combination play—status quo all along the route, the line of communication, in effect—and the urban game in Indonesia, which is the main target area, and where the Chinese now smell bad.

The name of our new game will be Development: National Development, Community Development and Urban Development. The region's nations, and we who support them, are now well aware that Pacification, as we now call the eradication of armed forces of insurgency, is one thing; but how to make it stick is another. The trick is to make it financially attractive—
the wives (peasant and urban) will do the rest. And so we aim to follow up Pacification with a continuing, visible programme of National Development: Communications infrastructure; financial, commercial infrastructure; and let the private sector maximise on these facilities, with the essential minimum of central controls, themselves progressively relaxing. The maintenance of balance between the Rural (Community Development) and the Urban operations will be a continuing exercise in judgement by the national planning authorities. As a general rule, emphasis will first go Rural, to counter and stabilise against a Chinese-supported Communist operation. Then it will turn itself to the cities; hopefully before too late, because that is where the real future problem will be.

Russia will probably see it that way, and move in with impact projects—hospitals, stadia, monuments, port facilities, city roads—and the growing evidence of naval power in the harbours. With that foot in the door, Russia will buy or pressure susceptible elements in the ruling elites. Those will normally be in the second echelons, those temporarily “out”, but with enough following to be able to govern if they become “in”. Such a programme—revolution rather than classic insurgency—carried through purposefully could give the Russians what they want in acceptable time, while the Chinese are still biting their fingernails in the provinces. For our part, the answer is maintenance of influence through favourable trade relations, which means opening our markets to the product of the local labour-intensive industries, newly developing; and, with that foot in the door, the necessary technical help to ensure that the police, and especially the police intelligence services, are able to handle the foreseeable situation.

Technology. Nagging in the wings will be a Trojan Horse. The development of some extremely interesting—and expensive—gadgetry during the Vietnam conflict has given rise in some quarters to a belief that insurgency can be detected and prevented electronically. It is fair to say that some types of border intrusion can be so detected; and that, in response, some types of counter-action can be triggered. But these devices are a long way from being a national security package of “install it and forget it” dimensions. We still have to do it the hard way; and no change to that is likely in the foreseeable future.

View of the Immediate Future

There is the rub. If we go in alongside American combat troops, no problem. But Washington says, “No more”. If we go in alone, we must be prepared to help handle not only the indigenous enemy—which in most cases would be within our capacity; but also China. And that is beyond our capacity. In essence, if the problem is local internal, they do not need our troops; if it is externally supported, by committing them we bite off more than we can chew. It would appear, therefore, that our interests would be best served by emphasising our efforts in the Steps 1-5 stage. This involves a posture of constant readiness to respond to economic and political problems—not only at call, but indeed with a degree of discreet initiative. The alternative—maintenance at home of a field force for an improbable intervention—is a strategic shell game which will deceive no one.

As things stand at present—the United States on the way out; Japan not yet on the way in—the answer to field force intervention rests on Australia’s assessment of the separate and combined combat capabilities of the national forces of the local governments. It must be—it is—rated low. We have elements in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. They will contribute. But not enough, and not fast enough. The still doubtful capacity of any host country in South-East Asia to sustain an Australia-supported counter-insurgency operation past Step 5 will erode the confidence essential to a decision for intervention. The continuing absence of any effective regional co-operation—and the well-intentioned recent Five-Nation Pact, in all charity, can hardly be so described—leaves us nothing to hook on to.
The other side of the coin sees the possible host nation looking at us, and weighing the measure of our resolve. Can they afford the degree of commitment that is implicit in an invitation to a foreigner—and a Caucasian foreigner at that—to intervene? Can they accept the far heavier penalties for failure? A solo effort is something from which they could back off if the going got tough—make an accommodation—temporary perhaps; but enduring enough to let them evacuate their assets before the commissars finally took over. But a combined effort? There is no way out from that. It must be sure of eventual—and reasonably rapid—success; or it is better to accommodate now.

So—we look at them, and we wonder. They look at us, and they wonder, too.

It looks like Steps 1–5, and no more. And, of course, this is the Nixon Doctrine—perhaps the MacMahon Doctrine. Why, then, the troops? And—if troops, where, when and how? The troops will be required because political thought evolves slowly, and major variation to its physical expression—concrete action involving movement of personnel and equipment, provision or quitting of accommodation, financial adjustments—is even slower. Particularly is this so in South-East Asia. Some governments there still want our troops’ presence. That is the key. But their want is a continuing response to the presently (temporarily?) evaporated challenge of Chinese military initiative. They have not yet adjusted functionally—however much individuals may have adjusted intellectually—to the new facts of life in the area. There is a tremendous inertia in the mechanics of government, internal and external. Not always a bad thing—it does provide a built-in protection against the wilder responses to transient pressures. They still see our troop presence primarily as a form of commitment to defence against a Peking military assault. Some of them see us, secondarily, as a partner in a possible counter-insurgency—Vietnam fashion. The fact that their vision is false does not rule out its existence.

How do we see ourselves? Essentially, we swim with the tide; and the tide is made by the big boys. It would be not only unwise, but impossible for us to oppose it directly. Obliquely, perhaps. But our best bet for national survival is to study the functional and geographical areas where the exercise of our small power can be used with leverage—leverage coming from an internal condition within the host country that can be maximised as a counter-insurgent weapon; and leverage coming from a favourable geographic location. We would, for example, regard Malaysia-Singapore as meeting both criteria. We would regard Bhutan—in some unimaginable context—as meeting neither.

We would see preliminary action to strengthen the internal security posture of the host government—and so to preserve the *status quo*—as being a non-provocative, unexceptional gesture that would generate no reaction in the region, though we would not fool ourselves into believing that our actions would really pass unnoticed. Nor would we close our own eyes to the incidence of unexceptional but nonetheless effective forms of pressure from the other side—economic and cultural initiatives; cross-border troop deployments; black propaganda. We would recognise the thing for what it is—conflict in an undeclared form—a form which, carried through one way or the other, could make the more obvious forms unnecessary.

We would offer and contemplate the Australian troop presence primarily as a token of good faith—a commitment, while recognising that the “commitment to what” element of the proposition is gradually changing. While so committed, the troops would accept and exploit fully any invitation to operate in support of the host government in situations other than political disturbance—e.g. disaster relief; infrastructure development: roads, ports, markets; cultural development: schools, institutes, associations. In effect, what we now call Civic Action. We would aim to derive the maximum diplomatic mileage from these operations—local, national and international; and we would ensure that the public relations aspect is accorded at least equal status with the functional aspect.

We would almost certainly not take any part whatever in the opposing of civil violence by force. That we would leave to the local authorities. We would assume and hope that the Civic Action programme—in association with like-targeted host country operations—would
The View from Australia.
hold the line; or, that where and if the line were broken, the national police, acting if necessary in Field Force role, for which our military component may have trained and equipped them, would re-establish it. It is, in increasing degree, improbable that we would deploy field advisers with combat military units in the event of further deterioration; and, in the highest degree improbable that our own combat elements would take on a combat role, either in an allotted zone, or as an integrated stiffening to the local forces.

The Mid-Term Future

This period could be considered as starting with January 1975. By that time, the dust will have settled in South Vietnam, though Korea-style tension will prevail on the Demilitarised Zone. Laos and Cambodia will still be suffering a degree of North Vietnamese foreign intervention masquerading as insurgency; particularly Laos. The Russia-China situation will be continuing much as now, except that Russia's presence offshore, and in the ports and capitals of the South Asian nations on the Indian Ocean will be much greater, and China's presence in the culture and commerce of those same nations, and among the tribes on their northern borders will be correspondingly increased.

The tension will increase, but the nations of the region will develop an increasing capacity for living with it since the heat will come on gradually. We, too, will grow up with the problem. Part of our maturing will reveal itself in force structure. An early aim, which should be showing itself at the beginning of this mid-term period, will be to get the troops off the local soil, and keep them at sea. This will reduce almost to the point of elimination any possibility of accidental involvement. It will also permit maximum utilisation. And it will quieten the dissenting voices at home—both the spontaneous and the contrived—by removing most of their angles. The vehicle of choice is the helicopter-carrier—an assault ship with a capability for precision landing of tailored task forces appropriate to the nature of the problem.

With this equipment, the wheel of history has turned full circle, back to gunboat diplomacy. And none the worse for that. We have passed through an era in which the overseas proponents of air power—with their Australian counterparts trotting along behind—had sold the doctrine of air as the primary element. There is much to commend this in the field of conventional warfare; but in the lower scales of conflict—those which by now it is evident will be our major concern for the next generation of men and weaponry—it is a false idol.

However, the helicopter-carrier gives everyone a slice of the action. The one ship is a composite three-service force. And, not least important, unlike the aircraft on their fields a thousand miles away, it is visible. A lesson now vaguely re-emerging from the fog—thanks in large and unwelcome degree to Russian initiatives—is the profound political significance of a warship visible offshore, in all conditions of conflict at sub-conventional level. Sub-conventional conflict is the pattern of the future for Australia's probable involvements. For this the helicopter-carrier is the equipment most suited to the problems' needs—civic action, military and diplomatic.

The Long-Term Future

Perhaps 1980 and beyond. By that date, we can expect to see Japan emotionally and physically ready to accept involvement to protect—if not to foster—its own vital interests. We have indicated earlier that, for some distance at least, those interests coincide with Australia's. We have shown how, over the 1970s, Australia will be in the possibly thankless position of using its skills and resources to counter Communist-inspired revolutionary situations in South and South-East Asia—perhaps a strategic rearguard action—while Japan is developing its own momentum.
We visualise an eventual situation, perhaps 1985, in which we will be able to hand over the burden—too great a burden for a population that will probably, by then, number 18 million, however sophisticated their development—to the nation with the major interest; and ourselves withdrawn from what is an unnatural involvement—a Caucasian intrusion in an all-Asian situation.

Our future and our hope in the area is to trade. We have neither the means nor the desire to operate in any other context. Our military connection must therefore have a capability for surgical precision in its application, and a consciousness that the area of its deployment today is the area of its commerce tomorrow. And yet, beyond all that is basic survival. We will, therefore, go Forward. We will operate where necessary on South-East Asian soil; our presence and our physical impact will be on an essential minimum basis. And, the operation will be essentially a military deployment in support of a diplomatic position—never the reverse.