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Forward Presence for Deterrence
Implications for the Australian Army

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Introduction—Forward Presence and Deterrence

Armed forces are often required to maintain a forward presence beyond national territory, in support of national interests.[1] The Cold War saw large-scale permanent deployments in defence of allies in Europe and in Asia by the United States, the United Kingdom and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. In the last decade, the United States began new permanent or near-permanent rotational presences in Darwin and, with its NATO allies, in Eastern Europe. In contrast, the forward presence of military forces to deter an adversary is rare in Australian strategic history. The only notable examples are Australia's contribution to the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in the 1950s and 1960s, signalling Australia's commitment to the defence of Malaya in great power conflict, and the deployment of RAAF Sabre fighters to Ubon air base in Thailand from 1962 to 1968 under the SEATO alliance.[2]

Despite sparse historical experience, Australian defence policy has recently embraced the role of forward presence in order to signal the nation's strategic intent to partner and adversary nations. The 2020 Defence Strategic Update states: 'The capacity to conduct cooperative defence activities with countries in the region is fundamental to our ability to shape our strategic environment'.[3] The 2023 Defence Strategic Review takes this concept further, stating:'To protect Australia's strategic interests, we must contribute to the maintenance of a regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that is favourable to our interests'[4] and 'We must posture for the protection of Australia and for integrated defence and deterrence effects in our immediate region'.[5] The Australian Army's *Army in Motion* identifies the need to 'shape the environment by building relationships, capacity and resilience with other land forces', to 'demonstrate credible and potent land power to deter potential adversaries' and to 'prepare to respond to disaster, crisis and conflict in the region'.[6]

While these policy documents make clear the importance of forward presence, they only identify very broad objectives for these goals. This matters, since aligning force structure, posture and strategic objectives when undertaking forward presence is far from trivial, as demonstrated by different perceptions of the discontinuation in 2021 of the US strategic bomber presence in Guam and the six-month deployments of the US Marine Corps to Norway in favour of less predictable deployment patterns. NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battle groups have also been the subject of significant debates on the desirable attributes, purpose and size of forward-deployed forces.[7]

In this paper, the term 'forward presence' is defined as the presence of formed units or sub-units beyond the main domestic raise-train-sustain areas. This definition encompasses a long, if contingent, presence; open-ended rotational deployment; and the permanent stationing of forward presence forces.[8] Forward presence can support many different objectives, including defence diplomacy or direct assistance for political influence; capacity building to increase self-help; and demonstration of commitments. In this paper, we focus on what is arguably the most difficult and demanding—and, for Australia, also the most unfamiliar— form of forward presence: the deployment of armed forces to signal a deterrence commitment.

An army forward presence, either on remote Australian territory or in cooperation with a partner in Australia's immediate region, must be able to assume primary responsibility for signalling Australia's political intent. This remains the case even if the military commitment is part of a broader cooperation effort that includes the United States. This fits the guidance of the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and the reality of US alliance relationships in the Indo-Pacific, which require a high degree of self-reliance.[9] For instance, while the United States has significant military resources stationed in Japan, the primary response to Chinese 'grey zone' campaigns against the Senkaku Islands has been 'taken by Japan alone'.[10]

Deterrence has traditionally played very little role in Australian defence policy. At most it was an inferred outcome through Australia's possession of long-range air and naval strike capabilities, including the F-111 and submarines.[11] Hence, as Nick Brown wrote in a recent edition of the *Army Journal*, 'Historically, the Australian Army has been precluded from a role in deterrence' in Australian defence thinking.[12] That is beginning to change, with the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and 2023 Defence Strategic Review formally endorsing a strategy of deterrence, and Army acquiring its own long-range strike capabilities. However, there remains a common association of deterrence with strike capabilities in Australian strategic policy and public debates.[13]

This assumption represents a rather narrow view. For Army, the limited mobility of land forces—compared to air and naval forces—increases the importance of their location and organisation for signals of political commitment. Strategist Colin Gray noted that 'land warfare is politically entangling, in that soldiers are "in country" in a way in which sailors and air personnel are not'.[14] Therefore there is a dual character of both military and political significance in the location, structure and use of land forces for deterrence.

A key theme of this paper is the inherent tension between the *political* and *operational* logics that shape decisions concerning the structure and posture of forward-deployed forces. Where the political logic for forward presence is to signal national intent and commitment, the military operational logic relates to the creation or foreclosure of options to undertake certain types of operations. Acknowledging that political and operational logics can be in tension does not challenge the Clausewitzian argument as to the primacy of political purpose (and civilian control) over the use of armed force. However, it is the case that within the broader Clausewitzian logic of strategy, there are nonetheless distinct political and operational requirements which often pull decisions about the structure, posture and use of forces in divergent directions. For example, modern warfare places a premium on mobility and dispersion as key operational characteristics to ensure survivability. Deterrence and reassurance, however, may require the visibility of forces and confidence about their location to achieve their political objectives.[15] And, as the paper will demonstrate, historically political considerations have often overridden operational ones in decisions about forward presence.

In order to examine the role of army forward presence for deterrence, the first section of this paper reviews current thinking about structure, posture and forward presence of land forces in the United States and Australia. It also reviews the literature on success factors for forward presence as a deterrence posture. The second section develops a conceptual framework that identifies three models of forward presence:

1. 'Thin tripwires' intended primarily, through their sacrifice, to trigger an honour-bound political and military response;

2. 'Thick tripwires' which, while sacrificial, are sufficiently robust to require an adversary to cross the threshold from 'grey zone' conflict to open military conflict, and;

3. 'Forward defence', which seeks to deter by denying the adversary its intended objective, albeit within a broader national strategy for reinforcement and potential escalation.

In generating this conceptual framework, the paper considers historical difficulties in establishing a coherent structure and posture for forward presence for deterrence, and discusses a range of factors and historical examples that highlight the underlying tensions between political and operational considerations in establishing and maintaining forward presence.

In the third and final section, the paper applies our conceptual framework to the challenge for Australian decision-makers when using forward presence for deterrence. Two hypothetical scenarios are presented. The first is an Australian Army forward presence on the Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas Islands to support the integrity of Australia's sovereign territory. The second is an Army forward presence in support of a South-East Asian partner nation, on Palawan in the Philippines.

Although this paper does not offer specific policy recommendations, the analysis casts some doubt on emerging ideas about a self-reliant deterrence framework focused on long-range strike. A 'tripwire' posture that merely imposes cost through strike, but does not change the outcome, suffers from the same credibility issues as any punishment-based threat. To execute it in the situation of deterrence failure would risk further escalation for no prospect of gain, and throwing more forces into a lost cause—a concern that would be most acute for the side with the least ability to replenish small forces.

The paper concludes that despite the superficially less resource intensive nature of 'thin' or 'thick' tripwires, it is questionable whether Australia's could achieve self-reliant deterrence short of the ability to actually defend. In general, operational advantages and considerations of particular capabilities—in particular, long-range strike—need to be considered in light of the political considerations about their possible deployment and use. Army's traditional role of taking and holding territory remains crucial even as Australian defence policy enters an era of deterrence.

Forward Presence and the Future of Land Forces in the Indo-Pacific

After 20 years of conflict in the wider Middle East, Australia and the United States are rethinking the relevance, role, structure and posture of land forces in a new era of great power conflict within the maritime geography of the Indo-Pacific. This section reviews the literature on forward presence forces. It then examines emerging concepts of forward presence in the US Marine Corps, US Army and Australian Army. A key conclusion is that balancing political and operational considerations regarding force structure and posture remains a crucial challenge—in theory as well as in practice.

Approaches to the Study of Forward Presence

Most studies of forward presence focus on the great powers, in particular the United States. Historically, states needed to be great powers to undertake forward presence operations. However, in recent decades this situation has changed. The post-Cold War era has seen a boom in the overseas deployment of armed forces of various sizes to undertake diplomatic, capability building, humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. The leading contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations are middle-sized nations such as Bangladesh, Rwanda, Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia. While forward presence operations are expensive, cost-sharing agreements with host countries and new technology can mediate costs.[16] Further, many countries deploy forward in support of, and in cooperation with, alliance and coalition partners, and with national definitions of success more political than military. These factors make the widely recognised 'loss of strength gradient' for military success over distance a less pronounced barrier for national contributions.[17]

Within the scholarship, there are many studies on specific forward presence activities (e.g. for peacekeeping, defence diplomacy or deterrence purposes).[18] The Australian literature on forward presence is dominated by historical case studies of coalition contributions, many published as official histories.[19] There is also a small set of writing on defence diplomacy,[20] including a valuable recent volume edited by Craig Stockings and Peter Dennis subtitled *Eighty Years of Regional Engagement.*[21]

One key theme across the literature is the importance of the political signals that forward presence sends to other state and non-state actors. There may be multiple audiences for these signals, including host nations (often examined through the concept of 'reassurance'), adversaries (through 'deterrence'), domestic audiences and third parties (for example, many states contributed to US coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to influence Washington rather than to achieve a security outcome in the Middle East). There can also be unintended signals and consequences. For example, a decision to forward deploy forces may reduce a host nation's need and willingness to make its own defence preparations. Further, foreign forces can create social, environmental and political challenges for the host state.[22]

These studies tend to be empirical, and relatively few engage with the concept of 'forward presence' itself. Within the literature that does, a distinction is generally drawn between peacetime and wartime roles and purposes. For example, Michael Mazarr distinguishes between 'presence' and 'warfighting', while John R Deni groups deployments into 'military engagement' or 'forward presence'.[23] In a contemporary strategic environment characterised by 'grey zone' challenges, however, any implicit wartime/peacetime dichotomy needs to be qualified. In light of this complexity, authors often list 'deterrence' and 'building partner capacity' under both categories of forward presence.

The second way the literature differentiates between types of forward presence is through the size of the military forces. Size is used as a proxy to define the kinds of tasks military forces undertake. Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge use this method to identify three approaches to forward presence by hegemonic powers: 'none', 'light forces' which 'serve both operational and symbolic purposes', and 'heavy forces' which 'create a

permanent capability-in-being to turn back regional aggression' and aim to shift the regional balance of power.[24] Importantly, the authors clarify that 'the precise size of the force is less important than how it is operationally deployed'.[25] In a similar vein, Matthew Slack argues that 'the defender has three fundamental force posture strategies to consider in extended deterrence: a large force posture, a trip wire posture, and no forward posture'.[26]

The distinction between peacetime and wartime roles, and the emphasis on size, reinforces the importance of examining the *operational logic* of forward presence: the creation or foreclosure of options to undertake certain types of military operations. In general, the operational logic of forward presence arises from the interplay of forward presence forces with the broader military capacities of the deploying nation, the immediate capacities present in the host nation, and the military capacities of coalition partners. For example, the main operational purpose of a forward presence may be to enable the receipt of timely reinforcements from outside the theatre. Or their role may be to undertake credible defensive operations within a particular theatre, the strategic significance of which is tied to the broader war planning framework.

But when it comes to conflict, the size of forces is a weak predictor of outcomes.[27] Focusing on size downplays the significance of the strategies pursued, and the ease with which certain political objectives can be translated into military tasks.[28] As Jon Lindsay and Erik Gartzke observe:

> *The choice to use or mix different types of forces within or across [geographic] domains is not simply an operational military question. On the contrary … choices of how to threaten or utilize military violence is as much a political act as the decision of whether.[29]*

Host nations are likely to make judgements about reassurance and deterrence based on calculations far more sophisticated and political than simply the quantity of forces they are hosting. Forward presence forces often undertake public engagement activities specifically to reinforce the political significance of their presence.[30] For example, during the Cold War the United States, British and French garrisons in Berlin conducted annual major parades through the city to reinforce their link with the West Berlin local government and population; having US forces in Berlin accompanied by their dependents was an important element of reassurance.[31]

While the existing literature often notes the importance of force structure and posture of forward presence, it generally stops short of providing frameworks that can inform decision-making. Rovner and Talmadge note that 'much of the security-focused discussion of hegemony lacks analysis of the actual force postures that deliver these purported benefits'.[32] Mazarr argues that even though the US military is increasingly undertaking forward presence activities, it still needs to 'take seriously the problem' of what force structure and posture is required, and the tension between presence and warfighting operations.[33] This shortfall is particularly a problem for broad quantitative studies, such as the literature on tripwires which, as Slack notes, often:

> makes the implicit assumption that the different types and purposes of forward deployed troops have homogenous effects on deterrence or assurance outcomes. In other words, these studies do not address how variation in military forces may change how they communicate defender resolve.[34]

An effective force structure and posture needs to support both the political and the operational logics of its deployment. These can often interlink: the operational purpose could be purely to give practical effect to political purposes. The purpose of 'tripwires', for example, is to demonstrate a political willingness to respond to an attack with other capabilities (possibly in another place) by ensuring a prominent commitment—and sacrifice—of the forces that make up the tripwire. In his study of tripwires, Matthew Slack observes that 'the tripwire's deterrent power [is] rooted in the politics that ties the defender's hands to respond. An attack on the tripwire locks-in the defender to honor its commitment'.[35] The assumption that a tripwire force is a highly visible and clearly understood signal that adversaries will recognise, and that it gives credibility to deterrence, ultimately rests on the *absence* of other operational options than the sacrifice of the tripwire.[36] What protects or expands operational options may thus work counter to the political purpose, and vice versa. A key challenge, which we take up in the conceptual framework, is how the political and operational logics develop across different phases of the spectrum of conflict, especially 'Competition/Peacetime', 'Crisis' and 'War'. With political purposes flowing from strategic relationships and national priorities, and operational purposes tied to organisational structure and available capability, there are inevitably points of tension.[37] These are apparent in current US and Australian concepts relating to the role, structure and posture of forward presence forces in the Indo-Pacific.

The US Marine Corps Stand-In-Forces Concept

The US Marine Corps has recently proposed the concept of 'Stand-In Forces' (SIF), which will shape the role of Marine forward presence forces in the Indo-Pacific. According to this concept, the SIF will:

> *Maintain US Security Guarantees through a persistent, forward-deployed posture that helps defend allies and partners. SIF operate forward in partnership with other nations to identify malign behaviour and gain knowledge regarding the potential adversary and environment.*[38]

Their role is to deter aggressor nations, to disrupt 'attempts to meet their aims below the threat of armed conflict', to support US naval campaigns such as through sea denial, to contribute to US and partner nation kill webs and, if necessary, to seize and control key terrain.[39] The Marine Commandant, General David H Berger, describes this as a return to 'our role as America's forward sentinels'.[40]

While the SIF concept acknowledges both the political and operational logic in forward positioning of Marine forces, the operational imperative predominates. Forward presence is justified on the operational basis that the presence of an adversary's 'mature precision strike regime will make it very hard for the United States to re-establish access from strategic distance'.[41] The political logics for forward presence are only modestly recognised—such as the potential to use 'security cooperation, security force assistance and exercise events to deepen relationships' and a desire to 'routinely and consistently operate forward with our allies and partners'.[42] The operational logic of the SIF concept envisions layers of forces, distributed across various sites. Unmanned systems provide the 'most forward elements', with larger weapon systems and key logistics such as refuelling points further back, potentially outside contested areas.[43] The goal is a defence-in-depth, rather than a linear barrier.[44] Although the SIF concept remains a work in progress, it identifies several significant attributes of the US Marine's approach to forward presence. First, it is to be 'inherently maritime in character', with the operational logic explicitly linked to concepts such as sea denial and defence-in-depth.[45] Second, the goal is for SIF to involve 'the smallest elements of the force possible' to reduce the logistics challenge and reduce the costs of attrition in conflict.[46] Third, under the SIF concept, forward presence forces are expected to regularly shift their

location and posture depending on current missions or operational tempo. Like the US Air Force's 'Agile Combat Employment' concept, the underlying principle is to move away from large forward bases to multiple smaller locations that allow dispersal and distributed operations. Finally, to achieve these goals, the Marine Commandant seeks, wherever possible, to create 'purpose-built forces' to 'ensure all elements are equipped and trained for their specific purposes'.[47]

Examining the political and operational logics of the SIF concept, a tension is revealed.[48] The SIF's political logic depends on a visible and persistent presence to reassure allies. By contrast, the operational logic relies on a small, mobile and 'hard to find' forward presence to enable intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) collection and survivability. While there are operational benefits in reducing the overall footprint of a forward presence through greater use of automated systems, and by placing key support functions outside contested areas, such efforts may impede political objectives insofar as the currency of strategic commitment remains human lives on the line. Finally, while the SIF concept recognises the role of the State Department in building relationships with regional partners, both the concept and wider US policy assume relatively close alignment between US political interests and those of its allies and partners. Such alignment, however, cannot be assumed. Significant differences in national security priorities exist, even with historically close allies such as Australia.[49]

The US Army in the Indo-Pacific

The US Army's thinking about forward presence in the Indo-Pacific is in its early stages and is similarly focused on developing force structure solutions based on operational logic. The 'Multi-Domain Operations' (MDO) concept endorses a forward presence in the Indo-Pacific to prevent *faits accompli* and to 'converge at range and speed' in a crisis. The MDO argues that 'projecting power from the homeland over many months is no longer a viable course of action'.[50] It emphasises the mass, spread and 'dominance' of its regional posture, while recognising the dispersal challenge. 'We seek more faces, in more places, but not necessarily with more bases' explains General Charles A Flynn, head of the US Army Pacific.[51]

For the US Army, forward presence is taken as the core of deterrence and reassurance, demonstrated through defence diplomacy, joint exercises, humanitarian and disaster relief, and visibility.[52] In the words of Lieutenant Generals Charles Flynn and Laura Potter:

> *Soldier-to-soldier linkages are the foundation of US land power based and rotating in the region … It is also the strongest and most credible signal the country can send to opportunistic actors that the United States intends to respond to a crisis or aggression.[53]*

Given the maritime geography of the Indo-Pacific, there is a recognition that many of the US Army's main contributions in any operational theatre will be part of a joint force effort, sustaining and enabling military tasks. Support may include the deployment of theatre missile defence capabilities, civil affairs, engineering, police, medical and military intelligence.[54] Founded on the belief that a strong and large military force will be the most effective path to deterrence, the US Army's conception of forward presence reflects a primarily operational logic.

Forward Presence and Australia's National Defence

Over the last decade the Australian Army has been a particularly 'restless institution' as it grapples with the question 'How and under what circumstances does the Army become a strategic force?'[55] The emerging answer is as a land-based, forward-projected contribution to Australian deterrence, engaged across the spectrum of cooperation, competition and conflict. The 2020 Defence Strategic Update tasks Defence and in turn Army to 'shape' and 'deter' as core objectives, while noting that both tasks will require substantial cooperation with regional partners.[56] *Army in Motion*, published the same year, similarly recognised the importance of regional deployments, stating: 'Persistent presence increases the likelihood of detecting coercive actions and shapes the behaviour and military calculus of potential adversaries'.[57] The 2023 Defence Strategic Review establishes a strategy of deterrence by denial across Australia's northern approaches and into the immediate region. To achieve this, Army 'must be transformed and optimised for littoral manoeuvre operations by sea, land and air from Australia, with enhanced long-range fires', which will 'result in significant changes to Army force posture and structure'. The Defence Strategic Review identifies that 'Army's combat brigades must be re-roled and select capabilities postured in northern Australia'.[58]

Australian thinking about forward presence and its relevance to the structure and posture of the Australian Army is thus developing rapidly. As in the case of the US Army, there is a heavy emphasis on cooperation with allies and partners, recognising the potential value of defence diplomacy as a way to both reassure and deter.[59] Like the US Marine Corps discussion, contemporary Australian discussion focuses on a forward presence involving mobile, land-based and long-range fires, as well as a return to traditional special forces tasks of regional reconnaissance and patrol. The nature and size of any such future forward presence is debated. Some favour larger force structures of combined arms, while others favour 'highly dispersed' small combat groups which may result in a 21st century capability mix that combines Army's 19th century coastal artillery with Second World War-style Coast Watcher roles.[60]

Though each of Australia's three military services seeks to contribute to deterrence, Nick Brown highlights that there is a notable 'gap in reach and lethality between Australia's land power and its national maritime and air power counterparts'.[61] Army's envisaged forward presence will prominently use long-range land-based anti-air and anti-ship missile weapon systems that are yet to be acquired and will represent a new capability that will rely significantly on joint, external targeting networks. Establishing that capability and then finding ways to demonstrate and credibly signal its operational effectiveness remains a work in progress.

Another particular challenge for Army's land forces is that a forward presence has to be deployed *somewhere*, requiring diplomatic negotiations between Australia and neighbouring states to establish the conditions for the presence of Australian land forces beyond our national boundaries. Beyond the physical footprint of any such forward presence, Army's proposed long-range missile capabilities will likely cover parts of the territory of other sovereign nations. As Will Leben observes, 'any vision of operating strike capabilities north of the Australian continent faces huge political challenges vis-à-vis our neighbours and partners'.[62] Even deployments on Australian island territories will elicit international scrutiny and raise domestic political sensitivities, particularly for the local island communities already grappling with limited resources. Ultimately answers to these problems can only be found within the context of Australia's broader strategic objectives for forward presence and the relationship between the rationale and the desired and viable force structure and posture. Developing a conceptual framework to support such decision-making is the focus of the next section.

Theory and Practice of Forward Presence for Deterrence

Not all deterrence postures include a forward presence of military forces. The tacit threat posed by the routine use of a nation's submarines and long-range bomber forces is a prominent example. Likewise, there are a range of forward presence operations that do not relate to deterrence. These include peacetime engagements such as overseas training (e.g. Singapore's use of Shoalwater Bay training area), capacity building, humanitarian and disaster relief, and other cooperative activities with overseas forces which do not have any link to a crisis management role.[63] They also include wartime operations, such as Australia's contribution to Iraq and Afghanistan, and stabilisation operations in East Timor and Solomon Islands.

In the 'shape', 'deter' and 'respond' triptych of Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update and 2023 Defence Strategic Review, these situations fall into the first (largely peacetime) 'shaping' and third (largely wartime) 'response' categories. As varied as these types of operations are in intended outcomes and political and/or operational purpose, as well as scale, risk and duration, what unites them is that there is no link between forward presence in peacetime, and crisis or wartime response. Therefore, the structure and posture of the forces reflect the particularities of the specific situation. By contrast, where the purpose of forward presence is to 'deter', the relationship between the structure and posture of the forward forces in peacetime and their operational role and political significance for crisis and wartime commitments becomes a key consideration.

Deterrence—from Nuclear Weapons to Tripwire Forces

Since 2014, great power conflict has returned as a central challenge. In response, deterrence has also returned as a significant concern for the United States and its allies. The 'essence' of deterrence, as Patrick Morgan notes, 'is that one party prevents another from doing something the first party does not want by threatening to harm the other party seriously if it does'.[64] This change in the behaviour of others can be achieved by preventing them from achieving their goals (deterrence by denial) or by inflicting substantial costs on them (deterrence by punishment).[65] Deterrence itself is ultimately about the state of mind of the potential aggressor, who needs to be convinced that the deterree's threat is credible. The aggressor also needs to be convinced that the deterree is both *operationally* capable of executing it and *politically* committed to doing so, despite the cost of possible retaliation. Deterrence credibility thus ultimately rests on the deterree's judgement of the deterrer's cost-benefit calculation.[66]

A second important dichotomy relates to the time frame and the types of situations in which deterrence seeks to influence behaviour. 'Immediate' deterrence seeks to deter a specific action by an actor in a crisis, and thus must involve signalling as part of general crisis management. In contrast*,* 'general' deterrence seeks to establish an environment where a potential adversary is deterred from mounting a challenge that would lead to an acute crisis in the first place. The existence of general deterrence is therefore linked to the relative balance of power between antagonists. But it is only a meaningful concept if it is not the same as the balance of power: to have relevance as a policy and strategic concept, deterrence needs to describe the consequences of a deliberate posture that creates specific operational options, and demonstrate political commitment to exercising them.[67] Hence, the literature concerning deterrence—and much great power deterrence strategy—tends to focus on the use of nuclear weapons as a means to inflict punishment. As James Wirtz explains, this is because nuclear weapons are an 'ideal deterrent capability because they tend to eliminate optimism about a positive war outcome'.[68] Moreover, it is in the context of nuclear weapons and their inherent capacity for punishment that a common nomenclature arose that distinguished 'deterrence' from 'defence' and gave rise to the identification of long-range strike forces as 'the deterrent'.

While conceptualising nuclear weapons as 'the deterrent' addressed the capability aspect of a deterrence threat, the question remained how to make the threat of their use politically credible, and to signal

that commitment. It is in this context that the notion of forward-based 'tripwire' forces arose during the Cold War. In this metaphor, it is not the wire itself that causes the enemy to 'trip' or stumble on its own. Instead, the tripwire is a wire that connects to something else that can do meaningful damage (e.g. the wire that triggers a landmine). The literature about tripwires generally focuses on the deliberate escalation from conventional conflict to the use of nuclear weapons, rather than the sacrificial forces to be 'tripped',[69] and is centrally concerned with whether the tripwire worked in the overall context of the (nuclear) deterrence posture.[70] However, while nuclear capabilities and deterrence by punishment were the primary focus of much of the Cold War literature, deterrence by denial and conventional forces have come to the fore in recent years.[71]

Three Models of Forward Presence for Deterrence

Based on the conceptual approaches in the strategic studies literature outlined above, as well as analysis of the strategic rationale for different deployments in practice, this paper proposes the existence of three models of forward presence for deterrence:

1. 'Thin tripwires' intended, through their sacrifice, to trigger an honour-bound political and military response elsewhere;
2. 'Thick tripwires' which, while still sacrificial, are sufficiently robust to require an adversary to cross the threshold from 'grey zone' conflict to open military conflict; and
3. 'Forward defence' forces, which seek to deter by denying an adversary its intended objective, albeit within a broader national strategy for reinforcement and potential escalation.

Thin Tripwire

For deterrence to be credible, the deterree needs to communicate the credibility not just of the capability to implement the threatened response but also of the determination to do so. A 'tripwire' forward presence solely supports the latter, being 'a small military combat force that lacks the mass to provide defensive power but deters aggression through signalling the credibility of the defender to honour its commitment'.[72] The operational purpose of the tripwire force is limited to ensuring its prominent sacrifice in response to any attack against it and thereby binding the honour of

the defender. The size, scope and location of that response is unrelated to the locus of the tripwire force itself; it may or may not take place in a different location but would rest on different forces. For example, when the Soviet Union placed pressure on Western allies to remove their garrisons in West Berlin in the late 1950s, the allies responded by moving forces to and within West Germany rather than reinforcing the troops within Berlin.[73]

The pre-eminent consideration in determining the structure and posture of a 'tripwire' force is the need to ensure that it suffers prominent casualties in case of an attack. Such casualties give credibility to the deterrer's commitment to the conflict. In the conceptual framework proposed here, 'thin tripwire' refers to a force that has no operational purpose other than to ensure its own sacrifice for signalling purposes. This does not mean that such a force could not have a secondary operational purpose in the lead-up to conflict. For example, even a 'thin tripwire' could fulfil an ancillary peacetime role through organic ISR capabilities. But to fulfil its primary operational role of ensuring its own sacrifice in case of conflict, the main considerations regarding structure and posture is that the force should be difficult to extract in a crisis and difficult for the adversary to circumvent. Land forces close to the forward line of defence, and without significant organic mobility assets, are an obviously good fit for such a tripwire. One (failed) example of such a force, which will be discussed further below, is the British Army reserve presence on the Falkland Islands before the 1982 war.

Thick Tripwire

A 'thick tripwire' is a force that is intended to be sacrificed in wartime but has the additional operational purpose of forcing the adversary into a large-scale operation. It provides clear indicators of warning, and unambiguously crosses the threshold into armed conflict. The Cold War Berlin garrison—a force roughly equivalent to a light infantry division—is an example of such a force. Despite having the capability to defend itself, this force was never expected to stop a determined Soviet attack. Instead, it was structured and postured so that it could forestall a Soviet or East German attempt to take the city through covert or paramilitary activities—the 'grey zone' in today's parlance. As such, it ensured that any Eastern Bloc attempt to take over

the city would lead to a major war.[74] In 2015, one rationale for NATO to establish battalion-size battle groups as part of the eFP posture in the Baltic countries and Poland was to have forces of a sufficient size that could quickly deploy to contain local Russian provocations, such as an 'accidental' beaching of amphibious vessels which could otherwise be used to put the alliance on the back foot politically.[75]

Forward Defence

A strategy of denial rests on the ability to successfully defend. This ability can be leveraged for deterrence if both the ability and the determination to do so are credibly communicated. A forward defence posture thus has operational purposes that go beyond its own sacrifice, and will reflect the force's role in the nation's broader theatre campaign strategy of denial. Except in the most limited of cases—such as a 'stay-behind' role for covert action behind enemy lines—the permanent forward defence forces would still require reinforcement from the main peacetime basing areas to fulfil their wartime role.[76] This can be an important determinant of force posture and structure in its own right—for example, through pre-positioning of materiel, balance of logistics versus combat capabilities in the forward presence, or a focus on the defence of sea and air ports of debarkation. Examples include the UK's stationing of forces in the Falkland Islands during the 1980s, the US military presence in Kuwait between 1991 and 2003, and NATO forces in Eastern Europe since at least 2016.

But operational concepts and plans notwithstanding, any decision to reinforce would be of political significance because it could be seen as escalation of a crisis. Hence, there is often a direct tension between political and operational considerations regarding when to reinforce, and indeed who should make such a decision. For example, this tension has played out explicitly in the NATO debates since 2014 over the operational benefits of giving NATO's Supreme Commander the authority to move alliance forces to reinforce Eastern Europe, against many (Western European) allies' insistence on maintaining political control over any such move.[77] To help distinguish these three forms and the force structure and posture implications for each across distinct levels of conflict, Table 1 sets out their distinct political and operational purposes as part of a forward presence for deterrence.

Table 1: Political and Operational Purpose of Forward Presence for Deterrence

			Thin Tripwire		Thick Tripwire
Competition / Peacetime / General Deterrence	*Political Purpose*	X	Affirmation of commitment	X	Affirmation of commitment
	Operational Purpose	-	Limited, e.g. terrain familiarisation. Deterrence rests on demonstrated ability to react elsewhere.	-	Demonstration of credible capability to perform crisis role. Deterrence itself rests on demonstrated ability to react elsewhere.
Crisis / Immediate Deterrence	*Political Purpose*	X	Affirmation of commitment. Signalling through preparations elsewhere.	X	Affirmation of commitment. Signalling primarily through preparations elsewhere.
	Operational Purpose	-	None (except perhaps ISR / early warning)	X	Sufficiently robust posture and structure (without need for reinforcement) to force adversary into unambiguously opening hostilities
War	*Political Purpose*	X	Strategic communications on casualties to reinforce (not weaken) commitment	X	Strategic communications on casualties to reinforce (not weaken) commitment
	Operational Purpose	-	Forward presence sacrificed	-	Forward presence sacrificed
	Examples		UK presence in Falklands before 1982		Cold War Berlin garrison; eFP and Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in Baltic States (before 2016)

	Forward Defence		(Minor) Contribution to Coalition Deterrence	
X	Affirmation of commitment and demonstration of capability of implementing defence plans / concept	X	Affirmation of commitment to support to US deterrence	Competition / Peacetime / General Deterrence
X	Preparation for crisis and wartime roles (at readiness levels related to warning).	-	Demonstration of ability for joint response	Competition / Peacetime / General Deterrence
X	Move to wartime role used for deterrence signalling. Need to manage escalation of tensions vs increase in readiness.	X	Affirmation of support to US deterrence	Crisis / Immediate Deterrence
X	Move to wartime footing (e.g. dispersal; receipt of reinforcements; demolitions) to improve overall defence capability.	-	Move to wartime footing for signalling as part of multinational crisis management	Crisis / Immediate Deterrence
X	Strategic communications on casualties to reinforce (not weaken) commitment	X	Strategic communications on casualties to reinforce (not weaken) commitment	War
X	Forward presence implements role according to general war plan (e.g. defence / delay / stay behind)	-	Ensuring multinational nature of a conflict	War
	NATO posture in Baltic States post-2016; US forces in Kuwait in 1990s; UK presence in Falklands after 1982		Small allies in US deterrence coalitions, e.g. small European states in eFP; Australian Sabres in Ubon	

'Thin tripwire', 'thick tripwire' and 'forward defence' postures can apply to coalition or alliance postures rather than a purely national context. Within coalition or alliance contexts, the need to align force structure and posture of national contributions to overall operational requirements for successful deterrence will be reduced for smaller allies. This is because they are generally not responsible for ensuring that the combined force can fulfil its intended operational role. The United States traditionally carries a more significant burden of ensuring the success of alliance operations than most of its contributing allies, while other allies enjoy a power of discretion for forward presence contributions in these scenarios. For example, NATO's eFP battle groups in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia comprise forces from a range of countries, whereas the United States, Germany, Canada and the UK serve as 'framework nations' with formal responsibility for ensuring their overall coherence and capability.[78] For smaller contributing partners the operational purpose recedes in importance as a determinant of the posture and structure of forward presence, as long as their composition is consistent with the overall allied framework. The political purpose of signalling commitment, however, remains.

Coherence and Incoherence of Forward Presence Postures

There are historical examples of deterrence strategy in which political intent and operational purpose effectively cohere. A good case study is the Falkland Islands, where the UK still maintains a forward defence capability in order to retain sovereign control. The political logic of Britain's presence rests on the importance of local popular consent combined with a clear national commitment to retaining possession of the islands. This intent is signalled through maintaining an ongoing military presence and hosting public events on the islands, such as a 2012 National Security Council meeting.[79] The operational logic of maintaining UK military forces on the islands is to establish deterrence by denial in order to prevent a successful invasion and to provide certainty about Britain's ability for rapid reinforcement to retain control if deterrence fails. Given the remote geography of the islands and the military capacity of Argentina, the operational mission is supported by the substantial and well-protected Mount Pleasant Airbase, which was established in 1985 to host fighter planes, transport planes and helicopters, and to serve as the main port of debarkation for reinforcements. Land forces on the

islands today number around 1,300 and are focused on the defence of the airbase, including through air surveillance and air defence capabilities. A Joint Expeditionary Force based in Britain is able to deploy 'at least an additional company of forces … within 24 hours' to the islands.[80]

The impressive coherence between structure, posture, and operational and political logic demonstrated by the UK in the Falkland Islands is far from the norm. Indeed, this example only emerged following a spectacular failure: the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands and the subsequent need for British re-conquest of the archipelago in 1982.[81] Conveying deterrence threats through forward posture is often difficult insofar as they require interpretation. During the Cold War, there were both 'striking differences among leaders on opposing sides' about how various deterrence postures were understood, and significant differences in the interpretation of deterrence strategy—even among close NATO allies.[82] And in decisions on whether and what forces to deploy forward, political and operational considerations can also be in tension. As President Eisenhower observed after the 1958 Soviet ultimatum to vacate West Berlin, 'Here is another instance in which our political posture requires us to assume military positions that are wholly illogical'.[83]

Reassurance—Allies and Partners Get a Vote

One key practical challenge in successfully communicating deterrent threats through forward presence is that allies and partners are just as much an audience as is the adversary. The signalling of credible commitment to allies and partners, known as 'reassurance', complements and complicates the deterrence aspect of forward presence. Even today there remain divergent views about the strategic rationale and role of the Alliance's eFP battle groups in Eastern Europe, generally reflecting differing state views regarding the shape that operations to defend allied territory should take.[84]

Successful reassurance needs to consider that allies and partners often have quite specific concerns, such as about the nature and cost to themselves and not just the certainty and severity of a response. They are also likely to have different insights into allies' thinking and actions than the adversary. Reassurance must also consider the political acceptability of deterrence within an allied population.[85] Hence, requirements for successful deterrence of the adversary and successful reassurance of the ally can differ quite significantly.

NATO's forward presence on the Central Front of the Cold War demonstrates the extent to which such tensions can shape force structure and posture in ways that make little operational sense. Since the mid-1960s, political considerations had dictated that NATO's main line of defence was placed directly at the inner German border, rather than along the more defensible lines bordering the Elbe, Wester or Rhine rivers. Further, political considerations precluded any fortifications (such as prepared minefields or bunkers) to facilitate defence. In this regard, there was concern that any such infrastructure would give physical expression to the partition of the two Germanies. Moreover, to bolster the intended deterrence effect, NATO sought to ensure that the Warsaw Pact would engage as many allies' forces from the outset of a conflict. Hence, the forces of Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States and Britain were all assigned one or more sectors along the German border, rather than a more militarily coherent approach that might have seen the unity of national contingents preserved as either frontline forces or strategic reserves. Despite the significant operational disadvantage that political considerations imposed on the structure and posture of NATO's forward presence in West Germany, NATO allies accepted they were necessary to reassure West Germany and to ensure the maintenance of political unity among allied forces—that unity forming the basis of NATO's general deterrence strategy.[86]

Force Generation Challenges

The force structure of forward presence forces is never developed from a clean slate, but reflects the pool of forces from which a forward presence is drawn. The development of that larger force structure tends to be driven by operational demands in wartime, or at least operational warfighting concepts, rather than peacetime signalling. This is the case in Australian and US thinking about the future of land forces in the Indo-Pacific. But the structure of regular units in most armed forces, developed for warfighting as part of a joint force, is not necessarily well suited for the specific political, operational and tactical requirements of a particular forward presence mission. If forward presence forces are permanently organised, this means that there are then units that do not have the standard composition of comparable formations.

In West Berlin, for example, the British from 1953 and later the US Army from 1961 established specific 'Berlin Brigade' groups comprising infantry battalions, armour, artillery, and support elements. As it transitioned from a constabulary to a more combat-oriented role, the US Berlin Brigade became a unique formation in terms of equipment and training focused on combat in an urban rather than rural environment. While the allies established firing ranges and urban warfare centres in West Berlin, maintaining proficiency in tank warfare was challenging given the absence of suitable ranges. In effect, the US Berlin Brigade became a single-purpose formation that could neither be replaced by other units nor take on the roles of other units elsewhere.[87]

In contrast, if forward presence forces take the form of a permanent rotational contingent, where standard or task-oriented formations have regular turns on deployment, they require a force generation model that has a much wider impost on the overall force. In essence, they would require at least three times the forces on deployment as units cycle through preparation, deployment and reset periods. Where reinforcement for forward defence is part of the strategic posture, as in the case of the eFP, the required regular demonstration of strategic mobility for the rotation of forces offers benefits for signalling as well as for training and testing of planning assumptions. But the fact remains that a rotational force, rather than a dedicated permanent force, will require outsized resources for force generation that limit the feasibility of such a posture for smaller nations in particular.

Failing Tripwires and the Value of Political Opprobrium

While it is impossible to prove the success of deterrence, deterrence failure is obvious and the historical record for the success of 'thin tripwire' forces is particularly mixed. While some supposed failures of deterrence—such as the US constabulary force left in South Korea in 1950—relate to episodes of fairly short duration and unclear political commitment, the example of the Falklands War reveals the difficulty of credible signalling with a minimal force presence even in the case of national territorial defence.

As Lawrence Freedman explains, prior to the 1982 war 'the British government had been faced with two options, neither of which was attractive, and policy had been to avoid the choice'.[88] These were to give up the claim to the islands at unacceptable political cost, or to invest substantially in the islands' defence at unacceptable financial cost. UK interest had clearly fluctuated, and Argentina received 'mixed signals' about UK commitments.[89] There were few publicised activities that might have imbued the limited presence with political significance. Visible changes in the force posture mostly related to the comings and goings of UK naval surface units. UK signalling in the period immediately prior to the conflict, including the use of the Royal Marines to remove an undisciplined Argentinian commercial operator on a nearby island and the public deployment of three nuclear submarines to the South Atlantic, did not significantly affect the junta's decisions.

That latter outcome may seem surprising to those who assume an automatic link between lethality and deterrent effect. However, this assumption is not supported within the literature. Instead research, including by the RAND Corporation, suggests that despite the warfighting capability of nuclear submarines, the inherent mobility and limited visibility of these forces reduced their potential contribution to deterrence as a forward presence. Nor could they directly contribute to a reconquest.[90] In contrast, UK cabinet meetings in the Falklands since the war, while having no operational capacity, are an important contribution to deterrence credibility. In a similar vein, change-of-command ceremonies of NATO's forward air policing missions and eFP battle groups in Eastern Europe routinely include public parades featuring the flags of NATO and member countries, as well as ministerial presence from relevant countries, specifically to reinforce the political commitment inherent in these deployments.[91]

If deterrence fails or is about to fail, tripwires can, however, present significant challenges to the determination of one's own leadership to accept the implied—and required—losses, which can in turn lead to even more calamitous outcomes. In 1935 a small American military presence was established on Wake Island—located about halfway between Hawaii and the Philippines—despite the absence of any political imperative for control over the island. Militarily, it was hoped the force would contribute to a 'chain of strategic forward bases' across the Pacific, both deterring and baiting Japan.[92] However, there was no detailed logic for how this strategy

would operate beyond the presence of forces. War Plan Orange assumed that in the event of an attack, these remote forces would fall back to Hawaii. Instead, reflecting an unwillingness to either remove or accept the loss of these isolated forces, in 1941 an additional Marine Corps force of 388 personnel was deployed to the island, but it neither reinforced or evacuated when Japan attacked. Despite valiant efforts, US forces surrendered with over 110 Americans (military and civilian) killed and over 1,400 captured by the Japanese.

Short-Term Decisions with Long-Term Consequences

A final factor that can challenge the notion of a coherent link between strategy and force structure and posture is that, given the political significance of reassurance, decisions about deployments often reflect political concerns over operational rationale. In the Berlin crisis in 1961, US President John F Kennedy responded to a direct approach by Berlin mayor Willy Brandt for a sign of support by deciding to send an additional battalion to Berlin (as well as Vice-President Johnson and former commandant Lucius Clay, who remained highly popular in the city), without consulting either the Army or the Pentagon on the decision.[93] While successful politically in reinforcing US commitment to Berlin, this situation meant that the operational rationale for the US force presence in Berlin reflected political and very contextual force structure decisions. Given the political significance of its initial commitment, the battalion then remained there until the end of the Cold War.

In summary, the theory of forward presence for deterrence remains underdeveloped within the academic and policy literature. This paper has developed a conceptual framework for forward presence for deterrence, identifying three models: thin tripwires, thick tripwires, and forward defence. Each strategy has distinct political and operational logic, which can produce tensions for policymakers and military officials as they navigate the practical challenges of maintaining a forward presence for deterrence that signals political intent while remaining operationally viable. The final section of this paper examines how these three models, and their inherent practical challenges, might play out in future Australian defence policy.

Forward Presence—Two Scenarios for Australia

A key implication of the analysis so far is that reconciling competing political and operational considerations and signalling to different audiences are key challenges in using forward presence as part of deterrence. To consider how these challenges might be addressed in the Australian context, this section now explores two hypothetical scenarios: a military deployment to remote Australian territory in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Islands, and a deployment to a South-East Asian partner location, Palawan Island in the Philippines. The aim is not to make specific recommendations or predictions concerning which deterrence strategy may or may not be effective. Rather, these scenarios illustrate the choices, questions and tensions developing such a strategy would entail, and demonstrate how they may arise for future Australian Army forward presence deployments.

Cocos and Christmas Islands

The Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) islands are sovereign Australian territory, located to the north-west of the mainland. In the words of a 2017 parliamentary committee, they constitute 'a unique staging point for the protection of Australian Government interests in the region'.[94] Both the Cocos and Christmas islands are significantly closer to South-East Asia than to Australia. Christmas Island is the summit of a submerged mountain range, reaching 361 m above sea level and supporting about 1,800 residents. It is 2,757 km from Darwin and 2,606 km from Perth, yet only 497 km from Jakarta and 1,326 km from the Malacca Strait. The Cocos Islands are a series of coral atolls and islands located 970 km to the west

of Christmas Island, 3,690 km from Darwin and 2,937 km from Perth. The highest point is on South Island at just 6 m above sea level. Only two of the 27 islands are inhabited, Home Island and West Island, supporting around 600 people.

Britain claimed both the Cocos and Christmas islands in the mid-19th century, and Australia took legal control in 1955 and 1958 respectively, against the protest of Singapore, from which the islands were previously administered.[95] Until the late 1970s, Australian administrative control in the Cocos Islands was incomplete and was disputed by the Clunies-Ross family, which had run the islands for a century. Integration with Australia was affirmed in a United Nations referendum in 1984, and further measures to ensure administrative and legal control were enacted in 1991.[96]

While Australia now has undisputed political control over both islands, its commitment to the military defence of the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island is less clear. In the 1980s, two senior Defence officers, Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara and Air Marshal David Evans, publicly expressed doubt about the wisdom and feasibility of defending the islands. Evans said it would be 'somewhat naïve to assume that the status of being Australian territory automatically makes the defence of these far-flung possessions a practicable proposition for a smallish military power like Australia'.[97] He argued that for Christmas Island:

> the conduct of useful operations from a base so exposed to air attack and coastal surveillance would be quite impracticable … Resupply would be a most hazardous venture. Certainly the returns would not warrant the cost of attempting a defence, a defence that would be unlikely to succeed.[98]

By contrast he believed that it 'would be important … to hold Cocos— if this could be done without weakening the forces needed for defence of continental Australia', citing its distance from potential adversary ports and airfields, along with the location 'astride the sea connections linking Australia and the north-western Indian Ocean—the sea route Suez-Fremantle'.[99] The suggestion of abandoning territory was publicly rejected by then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.[100] The 1983 Strategic Basis paper and the 1986 Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities, known as the Dibb Report, identified significant challenges in holding both islands, even as the threat, given the capabilities of the Indonesian military at the time, was assessed as low.

While the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island are important as Australian territory, they have additional strategic value due to their location, alongside the Java submarine trench and as outposts along key maritime approach lines towards Australia. In today's era of great power conflict, the danger of opportunistic aggression and *coups de main* that are not easily reversed cannot be dismissed given the difficulties involved in reconquest of an island. Considerations of this kind led Sweden, for example, in 2014 to rapidly improvise a permanent land force presence on Gotland, which is often passed by Russian amphibious forces transiting between Kaliningrad and St Petersburg but whose permanent garrison had been removed after the Cold War.[101] In 2017, an Australian parliamentary committee publicly affirmed the importance of the Christmas and Cocos islands to Australia.[102] The 2023 Defence Strategic Review also explicitly identifies concerns about 'incursions in our north west shelf or parts of our exclusive economic zone'.[103] It observes that:

> integral to this sovereign Australian posture is the network of bases, ports and barracks stretching in Australian territory from Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the northwest, through RAAF bases Learmonth, Curtin, Darwin, Tindal, Scherger and Townsville.[104]

Still, the practical challenge of how to structure and posture the ADF to deter or defend against a rapid attack against the islands, (which are close to sea lanes regularly used by significant Chinese naval forces) remains. To examine how a forward presence for deterrence of attack on the islands might be approached, and the implications for force structure and posture, we now apply our conceptual framework.

A thin tripwire force would require Army to maintain a permanent, if small and symbolic, presence on the islands—akin to the UK Army reserve presence in the Falkland Islands prior to 1982. A company-sized formation modelled on Army's Regional Forces Surveillance Units in Northern Australia may be a model for such a force, which would not need to contain significant defensive capability to fulfil its role. However, the number of military-aged island residents may be too small to generate such a force, and Defence has publicly pushed back on suggestions of island-specific reserve forces.[105] Force sustainment would demand regular rotation of forces from within the broader Army. Since any such presence would not be removed in the case of a conflict, it would need to be a dedicated unit or significantly larger—of the order of a battalion—and be kept permanently under strength for force generation.

The purpose of the thin tripwire forces would be solely political in nature—to signal Australia's commitment to its territorial integrity. In this context, activities that would bring prominence and imbue the military presence with political significance would be a crucial consideration. The explicit recognition in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review of the importance of Cocos (Keeling) Islands is notable here. The conduct of publicised meetings of the Australian National Security Committee of Cabinet on the islands could be a practical measure which would emulate approaches taken by both the British Government in the Falklands in 2012 and the Indonesian Government near the Natuna Islands in 2016.

More challenging, however, is the question of what retaliatory threat would be triggered if harm were inflicted on the thin tripwire force. The logic of a 'tripwire' can rest on deterrence through punishment and the imposition of cost on the adversary through the destruction of high-value targets, or deterrence by denial and an honour-bound commitment to deny any further gains by the adversary after the wire has been tripped through the sacrifice of the forward presence. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review embraces deterrence by denial, which means that any small forward presence must be clearly linked to a much more significant operational capacity that can quickly respond. Therefore, it would be a grave error to believe that a thin tripwire posture (even if it only consisted of a small light infantry presence) would require only a small resource impost. Such an assumption would invite the mistakes of Britain in the Falklands before 1982.

A thick tripwire on the Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas islands would seek to significantly raise the costs of confrontation and ensure any hostile action is regarded unambiguously as an armed attack. Such a strategy should draw the adversary's intentions out into the open, allowing for clear political and military decision-making in response from Australia, the United States and the broader region, without requiring Australian forces to fire the first shot. In this context, it is useful to envisage a specific hypothetical event: a Chinese Coast Guard cutter or amphibious landing ship on a routine passage through international waters has a 'malfunction' which forces it to beach on the Cocos or Christmas islands. How would Australia ensure that it remains in physical as well as political control of the situation? Such a scenario, where large numbers of soldiers may quickly come ashore, could easily see the initiative ceded to China and shift the burden of escalation to Australia to open hostilities in response. Long-range air defence and strike capabilities would not be suitable to deal with the ambiguity that would

arise from such a 'grey zone' challenge. Instead, armour (or at the very least substantial anti-armour capacity), as well as short-range air defence and substantive defensive works for infantry, would significantly increase the cost and effort of offensive action by an adversary once they unambiguously crossed into Australia's territory, even if with still ambiguous intentions.

As with the thin tripwire, a thick tripwire posture would need political reinforcement and the demonstration of a credible response to an identified threat. A substantial military presence on the islands would contribute to both aspects. First, the bigger the force, the more its presence will speak for itself. Second, the more substantial the defensive capabilities of the force, the greater the adversary's forces needed to overcome it. This in turn provides warning and high-value targets for the employment of long-range strike forces, including air and naval units, from the Australian mainland, even if this would not rise to a capability for successful defence. However, as in the Wake Island example, a thick tripwire force would still entail the need to contemplate the sacrifice of forward presence forces against an adversary committed to overcoming them.

Finally, Australia could contemplate a forward defence posture in order to defend the islands against deliberate attack. This would require the organic capability of air defence, anti-ship missiles, and the ability to counter and defeat a landing force. The forward presence of a force of a sufficient size to be capable of achieving these outcomes would signal Australia's political intent to island residents, the mainland population and the international community alike. While ideally the forward defence of the islands could be undertaken by the forces already on shore, reinforcements would likely be required to achieve this goal, within the broader operational logic of defending the islands. This is because the force sustainment challenge of maintaining the military presence—both financial and in terms of the limited water and land resources on both islands—would make a large permanent garrison unfeasible. Therefore, it is likely that Australia would need to maintain a posture akin to that maintained by Britain at the Mount Pleasant Airbase on the Falkland Islands today: a small permanent presence that can be quickly reinforced if and when required. Notably, any political decision to reinforce troops in response to a crisis sends a powerful signal, both domestically and internationally, of the danger of imminent conflict. The management of such signalling would therefore require deft political handling by the Australian Government in order to avoid the unintended escalation of the crisis.

The establishment of a substantial Australian forward presence with long-range strike capability would send diplomatic signals that would need to be fully explored with neighbouring countries far ahead of their deployment. All military deployments convey specific political signals. What matters in this context is not Australia's intentions but the interpretation of affected regional countries. A land-based missile system on Christmas Island would likely cover part of the maritime claims of India, Indonesia and Malaysia. While these countries may agree with Australia's strategic rationale, and even value the potential security contribution of the presence, equally they may regard the Australian forward presence as increasing the strategic risks to their own national interests. Ultimately it is clear that political logic, rather than operational exigencies, will be the primary force shaping an Australian forward presence in the Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas islands.

Palawan

A hypothetical Australian Army forward presence in Palawan in the Philippines brings a partner nation into the political and operational considerations of forward presence for deterrence. Many of the considerations relevant to the establishment of a thin tripwire, thick tripwire or forward defence posture raised in this analysis could apply to Australia's relationship with the Philippines. The factors include the need for deliberate signalling activities, force generation challenges, regional concerns about long-range fires in an archipelagic context, and political concerns about reinforcement in a crisis. Rather than repeating those issues, this section focuses on the distinct challenges raised by this scenario.

In this situation, the Philippines is presumed to be facing increasing political and military pressure from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to allow the Chinese military access to, or sovereign rights over, Philippine territory. In response, the Philippines requests support from like-minded countries such as Australia. In consultation with the United States, the Australian Government decides to send forces to Palawan, an island bordering the South China Sea. The purpose of the deployment is to signal a visible commitment to supporting the independence and territorial integrity of the Philippines. Unlike in the previous example concerning the Cocos and Christmas islands, the host nation is as much an audience for Australian signalling as is the PRC. Australia's national interests in such a scenario would include reassuring and strengthening Philippine resolve to withstand Chinese pressure.

The dual objectives of deterring China as well as reassuring the Philippines raises questions. What does the host nation want defended? What would reassure them of Australia's commitment? And how would Australia's preferences regarding operational approaches and priorities, as well as the structure of the deploying forces, influence the signals sent to the host nation? A direct Australian commitment to the Philippines would deliberately tie Australia's security to the Philippines. Such a move would introduce a risk of misalignment between Australian strategic intent and the national interests of the Philippines. Any such misalignment risks creating tension between the partners that could be exploited by the PRC in the event of crisis.

This assessment would hold even in the case where—as is likely—an Army forward presence in Palawan were to form part of a wider US-led coalition effort. In such a scenario, Australia would have three distinct audiences to consider: the Philippines, the US and the PRC. An Indo-Pacific deterrence forward presence would require a very different mindset towards the host nation and the adversary than was the case during deployments for the War on Terror in the Middle East, in that the strategic effect rests on other countries' perceptions of Australia's willingness to enter into a wider conflict.

If it were to invite foreign forces to deploy on its territory, the Philippines would expect sufficient support to defend it. This expectation would raise several considerations for Australian decision-makers. For example, a judgement would be needed as to the circumstances under which a thin tripwire presence in Palawan—such as a small infantry force—would be sufficiently credible to demonstrate commitment. Given the maritime nature of competing claims in the South China Sea, naval and air capabilities would need to be effectively integrated to ensure that any coalition forces were directly 'tripped' early on.[106] In this regard, a land component would be most effective as part of a broader, joint tripwire deployment where a land component would provide an element of permanence with political significance that air and naval forces do not possess.

In contrast, an Australian thick tripwire force would be able to help the Philippines oppose a 'grey zone' challenge and would thereby force an adversary to raise the level of conflict to open attack. In this context, it would be important to deploy Australian forces close to likely Chinese objectives on land. Akin to the Cocos/Christmas islands scenario, the deployed capability might include anti-armour to defend against limited threats to territorial integrity, while leaving the initiative—and hence the burden of escalation— to the adversary. Such an undertaking would require close integration with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, which would raise issues of interoperability and military command arrangements to manage the risk of Australia being drawn into military engagements beyond its national interests.

A forward defence posture would seek to deter an attack on the Philippines by denying the aggressor the prospect of operational success. A military commitment in support of such a posture could extend to offshore islands, or more likely to the main islands of the Philippines. Either way, the success of such a posture would depend on the existence of a common understanding between Australia and the Philippines about what would be defended and how this would be achieved. If the Chinese navy attacked a Philippines naval vessel in the South China Sea, would Australia be willing to use long-range missiles from Palawan to help? If not, it may be better to eschew the forward deployment of such forces on a permanent basis, and focus instead on capabilities that are more clearly aligned to the limits of Australia's commitment to the defence of Philippine territory. This could entail the deployment of capabilities to support air defence at major ports of debarkation. While there are clear tactical advantages to strike (and strike first) in modern maritime and littoral warfare, the expectations that these capabilities may raise would not, for this very reason, necessarily align with more subtle political needs of nuanced commitments.

Likewise, operational requirements of inherent mobility for survivability could well be compromised if Australia's forward presence needed to be responsive to Philippine concerns. For example, would Australian forces be able to move within the theatre, or would they remain tied to defend Philippine high-value targets (such as population centres, transport and energy infrastructure)? If military survivability were dependant on concealment and inter-island mobility, would a deployment with organic theatre mobility assets not also raise questions about Australia's ultimate determination to stand by the Philippines?

While these scenarios shed some light on the potential characteristics of deterrence strategy in an Australian context, they leave unanswered the question of what could be a credible threat of response should an Australian tripwire be triggered. For this reason alone, it is almost inconceivable that Australia would engage in such a deterrence posture in a 'self-reliant' fashion. More likely, it would contribute to wider efforts led by the US, which would bear the ultimate responsibility of marshalling a credible threat of counteraction. No doubt an Australian deterrence posture that ensured its direct role in responding to conflict would be more potent than one that relied on the US alone. The question of how much more effective is beyond the scope of this paper. As a basic proposition, however, any forward presence that was deployed as a tripwire would need to be difficult for the adversary to evade, and difficult to save from destruction.

Conclusion

Since 2020, Australian strategic guidance has affirmed the importance of self-reliant deterrence as a priority task for the Australian Defence Force. This paper has explored the role of forward presence in deterrence, and examined implications for the role of the Australian Army in line with that guidance.

The existing scholarly literature recognises the importance of understanding operational and force structure aspects of the deterrence effect of forward presence forces, but offers little specific guidance on how this outcome is to be achieved. To address the shortfall, this paper developed a conceptual framework that focused on three models: a 'thin tripwire', a 'thick tripwire' and 'forward defence', outlining their different political and operational characteristics as a conflict escalates from peacetime deterrence to crisis and war. Historical vignettes have demonstrated the practical challenges of implementation, which mostly arise from the political need for signalling, to adversaries and partners, as a key element of deterrence. Finally, the analysis applied the conceptual framework for deterrence in two hypothetical cases: a remote Australian territory, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Islands; and a hypothetical forward presence in Palawan, in the Philippines.

Although this paper has examined the general desirable traits of a forward presence for deterrence, the central analytical concern has been the role of land forces and their unique connection with—one might say relative immobility on—terrain. A possible objection to this perspective is that a maritime conflict in the Indo-Pacific may well arise and bypass the land forces, and hence not trigger a land-based tripwire. But that is an argument for seeing the role of land-based forces in their proper context

of an overall, joint force and posture.[107] Above a certain level of escalation, conflict will inevitably touch the land, and the long-term consequence of conflict is felt most deeply when it challenges territorial integrity. That an Australian tripwire might only be tripped at such higher levels of escalation may indeed be a feature, not a bug, in the signalling of the nature of Australian commitments. Certainly, as demonstrated in this paper, tripwire and deterrent deployments are not limited to large continental fronts but can also be found in maritime contexts, from the Falklands, to Sweden's Gotland, to the isolated, 'quasi-island' of West Berlin during the Cold War.

In this context, a main conclusion of the analysis is that a close association of deterrence with strike capability alone falls short of a 'self-reliant' capability for deterrent effects. Indeed, if strike capabilities are survivable primarily because of their mobility, and thus cannot cede tactical initiative and the burden of escalation to an adversary, they may be unsuitable contributors to forward presence as part of a deterrence strategy. Herein seems to lie a key shortcoming of some of the emerging US and Australian force structure concepts for the role of land forces in the Indo-Pacific. The role of a forward presence in deterrence raises its own particular set of desired attributes that are different from those needed by forces in either peacetime engagement, or war.

Deterrence depends on a nation's ability to threaten a credible and unacceptable counteraction, for which a forward presence is no substitute. Simply showing up is not enough, and the essence of strike remains the ability to impose costs. The question then for self-reliant deterrence is whether Australian strike capabilities represent a sufficient threat at this strategic level.

Ultimately the findings of this paper cast some doubt on the value of a self-reliant deterrence framework that looks to strike directly as the key strategic factor of deterrence. Unless a tripwire posture ultimately leads to a reaction that includes a credible prospect of a counteroffensive to regain what has been (temporarily) lost, or a different credible way to force an end to a conflict on one's own terms, a reaction that merely imposes cost but does not change the outcome suffers from the same credibility issues as any punishment-based threat: that to execute it in the situation of deterrence failure would risk further escalation for no prospect of gain, and throwing more forces into a lost cause—a concern that would be most acute for the side with least ability to replenish small forces.

This means that the most credible deterrence posture for Australia is that which aims for the greatest operational role for forward presence forces: the ability for forward defence. Put another way, unless Australia can credibly deter through the capacity for a successful defence, its capacity for self-reliant deterrence is highly questionable. In this context, land-based strike does of course have a role—including and in particular in the defence of forward-based territory, such as the Cocos and Christmas islands. But this is a tactical role, not a strategic one, insofar as deterrence arises from the capability to defend, including in situations where the adversary has the strategic and tactical initiative.

While Australia has strong credibility for defending against and responding to attacks on its own direct territorial claims, it has little tradition of extending such commitments to other countries—let alone doing so self-reliantly. Although Australia has a long history of overseas deployments, these have largely occurred as part of larger military coalitions, and have often been undertaken to gain the support or drive the focus of Australia's alliance partners (such as keeping the United States and United Kingdom engaged in South-East Asia in the Cold War, or strengthening the relationship with the United States during the War on Terror). Since the 1960s these deployments have generally been in *response* to adversary challenges, rather than in anticipation of them.

It may well be that this will change and that Australia's contribution to the deterrence of a great power will occur primarily through coalition operations in conjunction with the US. In this case, it is by relaxing the 'self-reliant' aspect of Australian deterrence that the scope and role of a more limited Army forward presence in deterrence becomes credible. Indeed, in the face of contemporary strategic threats, an Australian tripwire may run not from the Army's forward presence south towards Canberra, but east to Washington DC.[108] Either way, the underlying political and operational logics that would shape the desirable force structure and posture attributes of such a forward presence would remain the same.

The observations in this paper are offered not as predictions or even recommendations, but rather to highlight that significant future analysis remains to be done to assess the specific merits and force structure requirements of deterrence in Australian strategic policy, and its implications for Army force structure and posture. Across all of the specific approaches that could be pursued—thin tripwire, thick tripwire or forward defence—the coherence between the political and operational logics of the deployment and the alignment between the strategic objectives and the force structure and posture raise challenges for Army, Defence and government as a whole. Army's traditional role of taking and holding territory remains crucial even as Australian defence policy enters an era of deterrence.

Biographies

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