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Planning for war in Southeast Asia: The Far East Strategic Reserve, 1955–66

Tristan Moss¹

During the early Cold War, Australia expected to fight any global war alongside the British. Somewhat ironically, while it was increasingly independent from Britain in foreign policy and security planning, unlike during previous wars, Australia planned to fight any future war with its units integrated into Commonwealth formations. The cooperation of Australian forces with the British and other Commonwealth countries in the Korean, Malayan and Borneo conflicts reflected the close strategic and operational integration that built on the experiences of the two world wars, and the strategic desire of both Britain and Australia to engage the other in the efficient pursuit of their own security. The integration of forces at the formation level also reflected the smaller scale of people and resources involved. From 1955, these efforts were centred on the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR), a force that contained British, New Zealand and Australian troops, aircraft and ships and was based in Malaya and Singapore.² The FESR was Australia's first permanent peacetime overseas deployment, and ultimately stretched to decades. The FESR was both a symbol, in that it represented the Commonwealth's commitment to

1 The author would like to thank the Australian Army History Unit for the award of a grant that assisted in this research.

2 There seems to be no accepted name for the FESR, even in archival documents: some authors include a reference to the Commonwealth or British Commonwealth in the acronym.

defending the region, and a tangible contribution to Commonwealth Cold War aims, in its availability to fight wars in Malaya and Borneo and to ensure that the Commonwealth was 'at the table' with the United States and with the newly formed Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). For thousands of Australian service personnel, it was a central and unique part of their service in the 10 years prior to Vietnam, shaping their experiences, and also the focus of the services of which they formed a part.

Creating the FESR

At the strategic level, postwar Commonwealth military cooperation was managed through coordination between the various Chiefs of Staff in each nation. The British Commonwealth Occupation Force, Japan was planned and overseen through senior military representatives from the United Kingdom, Australia, India and New Zealand. These meetings led directly to the creation of the ANZAM defence planning system in August 1949 (named after the Australia, New Zealand and Malayan area it was intended to safeguard). The organisation was limited in its early aims: to secure the maritime approaches to Australia and New Zealand.³ ANZAM did not initially commit its members to particular troop numbers in the event of conflict, which was well enough for Australia, which had few permanent forces with which to make such a promise.⁴ Australian strategic thinking also assumed that, in the event of war, a third Australian Imperial Force would be sent to the Middle East.⁵ The result, to use historian Raffi Gregorian's phrase, was that ANZAM was 'a fairly moribund organization for the first years of its existence', as the Commonwealth's strategic direction in Asia was concentrated on the Korean War.⁶

3 Peter Edwards with Gregory Pemberton, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 1, *Crises and commitments: The politics and diplomacy of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1965* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1992), 61.

4 Hiroyuki Umetsu, 'The origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve: The UK proposal to revitalise ANZAM and the increased Australian defence commitment to Malaya', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 50, no. 4 (December 1, 2004): 510, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2004.00350.x.

5 DM Horner, *Strategic command: General Sir John Wilton and Australia's Asian wars* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141.

6 Raffi Gregorian, *The British Army, the Gurkhas and Cold War strategy in the Far East, 1947–1954* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), 117, doi.org/10.1057/9780230287167.

Between August and October 1953, British, Australian and New Zealand military planners met in Melbourne as part of the ANZAM arrangements, and in particular to discuss the relationship's future. This meeting laid the foundation for Commonwealth cooperation in the region for the next decade and a half. Key among their agreements was the creation of a Commonwealth force that might respond quickly to threats in the region. This proposal reflected Britain's concerns about its own ability to provide troops to hotspots around the world, with the concurrent belief that the situation in Southeast Asia was deteriorating. In a letter to Menzies formally suggesting the reserve, the British Minister for Defence, Lord Alexander, wrote that 'the United Kingdom will be prepared to play its part. But, as you will understand ... there are limits to what we can do'.⁷

The FESR was also an effort to draw Australia and New Zealand into Commonwealth (rather than US) defence agreements.⁸ With all countries agreeing to the new arrangements, ANZAM became a permanent peacetime organisation, rather than one that would be staffed in the event of war. This decision also put an end to the concept of sending Australian troops to the Middle East in the event of global war.⁹ A new, more closely integrated ANZAM Chiefs of Staff Committee assumed responsibility for all planning for the defence of the Malayan area, as well as the Australian and New Zealand maritime areas.¹⁰ That this committee was based in Melbourne was further evidence of the British desire to draw the Australians deeper into the organisation, and to divest themselves of as much of the burden as possible.

For its part, the Australian Defence Committee saw ANZAM as an 'evolution in British Commonwealth Defence', given that now Australia would focus almost entirely on Southeast Asia in its strategic thinking.¹¹ The Defence Committee believed that the creation of a strategic reserve conformed with Australian government policy to, as the Defence Minister

7 Letter, Alexander to Menzies, 29 June 1953, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A5949, 1464/1.

8 Umetsu, 'The origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve', 517.

9 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 163; Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, vol. 1, *Strategy and diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981), 347.

10 'Report on discussions between the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the Australian Defence Committee and the New Zealand Chief of the General Staff', 21 October 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1; Umetsu, 'The origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve', 523.

11 'ANZAM as a regional arrangement: views of Australian Defence Committee', October 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1; letter, Alexander to Menzies, 12 October 1954, NAA: A5949, 1464/1.

stated to parliament in February 1952, check communist aggression while also ensuring that Australia made a tangible contribution in support of 'our powerful friends and to the Allied strategic starting point, should war occur'.¹² More broadly, the FESR, as tangible evidence of ANZAM's capabilities, was a means by which Britain, and the Commonwealth, could wield influence in US strategic planning. Having been kept out of the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) Treaty, and conscious of the need for American support in any global war, the British sought to position ANZAM as the Commonwealth regional command structure that would fit within US direction should the Cold War turn hot; Commonwealth countries would work through ANZAM as a collective, rather than individually with the United States, thereby giving 'the ANZAM nations an effective voice at both political and strategic levels'.¹³ Confirmed by the contributing nations in a 1955 London prime ministers meeting, the FESR was a force that was as much a tool of politics and diplomacy as it was a military and strategic one.¹⁴

The structures proposed in 1953 stayed largely stable throughout the FESR's existence. The force was based around a brigade of infantry, with supporting units. The experience of integrating Commonwealth battalions in the Korean War was fresh in the planners' minds, reflected in the decision to reaise the 28 Commonwealth Brigade that had served in last stages of Korea.¹⁵ Australia provided a single battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (RAR), with the remaining two battalions coming from the British Army. Australia also committed to maintaining another battalion at high readiness in Australia for use in Malaya should an emergency arise.¹⁶ In 1957, New Zealand replaced one of the brigade's British battalions with their own, making it a truly Commonwealth force.¹⁷ Other services were represented in the reserve. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) provided two frigates permanently based in

12 Joint Planning Committee, 'Formation of a Far East Strategic Reserve', 13 August 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1. See also Umetsu, 'The origins of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve', 522.

13 'Report on discussions between the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the Australian Defence Committee and the New Zealand Chief of the General Staff', 21 October 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1.

14 L MacLean, *ANZIM to ANZUK: An historical outline of ANZAM* (Canberra: Government Publishing Service, 1992), 16.

15 'Formation of a Far East Strategic Reserve in Malaya: Paper by the Australian Joint Planning Committee', 13 August 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1.

16 'Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve: Composition of Australian Contribution', no date, A5949, 1464/1, NAA.

17 Christopher Pugsley, *From Emergency to Confrontation: The New Zealand armed forces in Malaya and Borneo, 1949–1966* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2003), 123.

Southeast Asia. An aircraft carrier was also allocated to the FESR, but given that Australia only had two, this ship rotated to Southeast Asia to exercise for a handful of months each year, and then returned to Australia for maintenance and training. Finally, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) supplied three squadrons: two fighter squadrons of sixteen F-86 Sabres each, and a single bomber squadron of eight Canberras. These were based at Butterworth on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, which needed to be substantially upgraded, necessitating the deployment of an airfield construction squadron alongside other maintenance and administrative staff.¹⁸

Australian forces in the FESR

While small numbers of Australian soldiers and airmen had been in Malaya since 1950, the first large contingents arrived to join the FESR in 1955.¹⁹ The bulk of 2RAR and supporting units arrived in Penang in October, along with over 300 members of the RAAF who started work building Butterworth airfield. The destroyers HMAS *Arunta* and HMAS *Warramunga*, already in Malaya for ANZAM exercises, assumed their Strategic Reserve duties in June 1955.²⁰ While the British already had significant peacetime forces in Malaya, largely to fight the Emergency, such a force was a departure for Australia, which had only six years previously created the permanent Army. This was Australia's first permanent overseas deployment, and would amount to around 4,500 soldiers, sailors and airmen and would last until the 1970s.²¹

Australian forces came under the direction of the British Defence Coordinating Committee (Far East), the BDCC(FE). A civilian–military organisation, the BDCC(FE) was chaired by the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia and the three British service commanders in

18 Alan Stephens, *The Australian centenary history of defence*, vol. 2, *The Royal Australian Air Force* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 249.

19 Some units had been on loan to Far Eastern Land Forces (FARELF), such as No 1 Detachment 101 Wireless Troop, and Lincoln bombers and Dakota transports had participated in the Emergency. Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 5, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian military operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950–1966* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1996), 77–78.

20 Jeffrey Grey, *The official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948–1975*, vol. 7, *Up top: The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian conflicts, 1955–1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1998), 25.

21 *Ibid.*

the region. Australia and New Zealand were involved in decision-making only when the committee considered matters relating to the ANZAM area, through the High Commissioners in Malaya and the ANZAM Defence Committee in Australia. After much debate in Britain, the committee structure was disbanded in 1962, to be replaced with a single Commander-in-Chief for the Far East; the organisation they oversaw was known as Far East Command (FEC).²²

28 Commonwealth Brigade itself fell under the purview of Far Eastern Land Forces (FALEF). From 1955, the use of Australian forces was subject to restrictions placed on it by the Australian Government: the Australian Cabinet, for instance, emphasised that the Australian component was not to be used in aid to the civil power and ensured that this was inserted into the directive to the British commander.²³ It was telling that the directive to the unified commander also instructed him 'to preserve our [Britain's] links with Australia and New Zealand, particularly in ANZAM, and to contribute to their forward defence'.²⁴

The commitment of so much of Australia's combat power to the FESR allowed for excellent, and hitherto unparalleled, peacetime training not available in Australia. The opportunity to train was embraced by the RAN, for whom co-location with the Far East Fleet provided access to a far larger range of training activities not available in Australia, including anti-submarine warfare exercises; although the Department of the Navy was, at times, frustrated by what it saw as an overemphasis on training by Australian officers with the Strategic Reserve at the expense of other duties.²⁵ The Army also saw service in Southeast Asia as an opportunity to learn. In its assessment of the Strategic Reserve in 1953, the Joint Planning Committee believed that 'inclusion of Army units in the Reserve would enable them to gain experience in a new theatre and one in which the Army might be engaged in a global war'. The result would be the creation of a cohort of officers with knowledge of the region and the type of war that might be fought there.²⁶

22 Ibid., 26–27.

23 'Minute by ANZAM Defence Committee meeting held on 28th July 1955', 28 July 1955, NAA: A5954, 1467/9.

24 'Directive for the Commander-in-Chief Far East', 1962, NAA: A1945, 287/2/13.

25 Grey, *Up top*, 30.

26 'Formation of a Far East Strategic Reserve in Malaya: Paper by the Australian Joint Planning Committee', 13 August 1953, NAA: A5949, 1464/1.

The 1961 SEATO exercise 'Pony Express' is illustrative of the benefits of service with the FESR. An Australian lieutenant colonel was sent as an observer to the exercise that simulated an amphibious landing in North Borneo. Composed of elements of the US Seventh Fleet, the British Far East Fleet, four Australian warships, the entire 3 Marine Division, 42 Commando Royal Marines and one company of 1RAR, the exercise was the perfect opportunity to compare the amphibious warfare doctrines of Australia's two partners, and ensure continued integration between them and Australia.²⁷ Secretary of the Army, Bruce White, believed that 'such an exercise, particularly on the scale on which it is to be conducted [means that] the lessons to be learnt will be of considerable value'.²⁸ For the Navy, the exercise saw HMAS *Melbourne* act as the flagship of the anti-submarine warfare group: participation in such a large fleet training was completely unachievable in Australia.²⁹

Nonetheless, for the Army, operations took precedence over training for conventional war, at least in the FESR's early years. As the first battalion to be deployed, and with the Malayan Emergency still ongoing, 2RAR found little time for training for war as part of the Strategic Reserve, as opposed to the small unit and basic skill training of use in its ongoing operations in Malaya. For many troops on this deployment, the FESR 'was little more than a shadow compared with the reality of the foetid jungle'.³⁰ As the Emergency wound down, more time was found for training. 3RAR completed two months of training for conventional warfare during its tour, although much of this focused on company-level and below exercises; only two periods of a total of 299 were allocated to operations in an atomic battlefield, reflecting both the battalion's focus on low-intensity warfare, and the unreality of global war involving nuclear weapons to many.

By 2RAR's second tour from 1961 to 1963, most of its time was spent training with the Strategic Reserve; six months straight from October 1962.³¹ While the time allocated to training changed, there was not necessarily an improvement in the Army's ability to meet its requirements in the event of war. During 2RAR's 1963 Exercise 'Bellbuster', significant

27 Report, P Falkland, 'SEATO Amphibious Exercise "Pony Express" Report by LT COL P Falkland', 24 May 1961, NAA: A6059, 65/441/125.

28 White to Secretary Prime Minister's Department, 29 March 1961, NAA: A6059, 65/441/125.

29 Press release, 27 April 1961, NAA: A6059, 65/441/125.

30 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 132.

31 *Ibid.*, 147, 156, 160–62.

deficiencies were identified by the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel AB Streeton, including inappropriate jungle equipment, lack of small arms readiness, the weight of signals equipment and lack of training with helicopters. Many of these issues were out of Streeton's control.³² It is also worth noting that 28 Commonwealth Brigade was not necessarily ready to undertake its primary role of emergency force at a moment's notice: when Indonesian troops landed in Malaysia in 1964, for instance, only the New Zealand battalion was available, as 3RAR was on the Thai border, and the British battalion was in the process of being replaced.³³

There was the more significant issue of the mismatch between the forces promised by each member of the Strategic Reserve in the event of war, and those actually available. If a limited war were to break out in Southeast Asia, the Strategic Reserve would be short destroyers and minesweepers. In 1959, when the RAN was requested to report on its readiness should the deteriorating war against communist-backed insurgents erupt into war in Laos, the two destroyers then with the reserve were ready but at reduced complements, and the troop transport HMAS *Sydney* and carrier HMAS *Melbourne* would take some weeks to be ready to be deployed.³⁴ For its part, the Army spent the period between 1955 and 1965 in flux. Faced with the possibility of a nuclear war in Southeast Asia, and responding to US experiments on the issue, the Army introduced the Pentropic divisional organisation in 1960.

Based around five combined-arms battlegroups of five companies each, the organisation was intended to pack more punch on the nuclear battlefield but was ultimately unwieldy in the field. The infantry battalion that was deployed to the Strategic Reserve was exempt from the Pentropic organisation, but a new battalion had to be raised to allow it to rotate back to Australia without having to reorganise on Pentropic lines. If war broke out, the Army planned to commit a Pentropic battlegroup as well, supporting American and Asian partners. This left the Army in the questionable position of maintaining two different structures in war. Pentropic organisation was discarded in early 1965, but not before causing a great deal of disruption as units were reorganised.³⁵ By 1964 the Army was also entering a long period of expansion, with the introduction of national service and the creation of additional units.

32 Ibid., 162.

33 Pugsley, *From Emergency to Confrontation*, 202.

34 Grey, *Up top*, 28.

35 JC Blaxland, *Organising an army: The Australian experience 1957–1965* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1989), 53.

Commonwealth relations

The service of Australian units within a Commonwealth formation was a relatively new experience for Australia. During the Second World War, Australia vigorously resisted breaking up its divisions when fighting alongside the British. Australian troops served with British in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan, to which Australia contributed a brigade, three fighter squadrons and naval forces; about a third of the entire force.³⁶ One battalion – later two – served with 27 Commonwealth Brigade in Korea, part of 1 Commonwealth Division. This level of integration was continued and expanded on in the FESR, where Australians also served within integrated units, including provost, signals, field ambulance, service and engineering units.

The creation of integrated Commonwealth units created some teething problems as Australian and British service personnel learned to work together, particularly in the inclusion of an Australian platoon in a British Royal Army Service Corps company. An officer from 2RAR, Major LC Chambers, reported problems caused by differing experience levels between Australian regulars and the British national servicemen with whom they had to work, differing attitudes towards the proper relationship between officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks, and the perception of unfair restrictions on 'the more mature Australian soldier', particularly curfews. Chambers believed that while individually the complaints were minor, 'even petty', taken together 'they could ... add up to a general sense of disgruntlement if they were disregarded'.³⁷ The integration of a sub-unit within a company, Chambers felt, 'depends for its success too much on personalities and individual characteristics'. He recommended that from thereafter, Australian administrative units should be of company strength at least.³⁸

Nonetheless, Australian sub-units were not withdrawn from integrated units: to do so, it was reasoned, would undermine the 'all arms' nature of the Australian commitment, and remove an important contribution to the

36 James Wood, *The Australian military contribution to the occupation of Japan, 1945–1952* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin 1998), 11.

37 HQ 1 Federal Division District, 'Integration of Australian Components in Commonwealth Units', 22 August 1956, NAA: A6059, 41/441/32.

38 GOC Malaya Command, 'Integrated British/Australian Units', 30 August 1956, NAA: A6059, 41/441/32.

FESR at a time when British manpower was stretched. While there were always irritants, efforts by Australian and British commanders to ensure that integration ran smoothly seemed to keep a lid on any problems.³⁹

One notable facet of the Australian deployment of troops to Malaya during peacetime was the presence of service families. Some had accompanied troops to BCOF but, alongside service families in Papua New Guinea, this was the first time that service families had travelled overseas in large numbers to permanent bases. While the Defence Minister at the time, Phillip McBride, promised that the deployment of 2RAR to Malaya would include provision for service families, shortages of appropriate housing caused problems. Almost 400 servicemen within the battalion were eligible for married quarters (although some did not take up the option); that the battalion was arriving in an area already occupied by British troops made for slim pickings either for married quarters on base or in the private market, contributing to low morale among Australian troops. Complaints to British commanders in the area went unheeded until the commanding officer of 2RAR, Lieutenant Colonel JG Ochiltree, himself made a statement by refusing the married quarter allocated him, in front of the entire officers' mess. While more housing was reallocated from British servicemen after this incident, inadequate housing dogged Australian forces for years.⁴⁰

At a time when relatively few Australians travelled to Asia, life in Malaya was an eye-opening experience for hundreds of Australian service families.⁴¹ Once housing issues were smoothed out in the 1960s, families lived in suburbs often more salubrious than those to which they were accustomed in Australia, with beautiful tropical gardens and access to base services such as a cinema, swimming pool and hospital – all only for the use of Commonwealth troops and their dependants. On and around bases in Penang, Butterworth and Singapore, Australians were exposed to a foreign culture to which they were the outsiders. All families were entitled to at least one domestic servant, an unheard-of luxury in Australia.⁴² At the same time, there was shopping to be had in the towns near the base,

39 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 86.

40 *Ibid.*, 88–89.

41 For a detailed discussion of Australian life at Butterworth, see Mathew Radcliffe, *Kampong Australia: The RAAF at Butterworth* (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2017).

42 Christina Twomey, 'Bring the family: Australian overseas military communities and regional engagement, 1945–1988', in *Beyond combat: Australian military activity away from the battlefield*, ed. Tristan Moss and Tom Richardson (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2018), 13.

and excursions to the surrounding Malayan countryside. Australians were also exposed to the particular racial relations then prevalent in the former British colony and brought their own racial attitudes; this was the period of White Australia, after all. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, the three Australian services actively discouraged their servicemen from marrying non-European women.⁴³ Defence policy was to emphasise the difficulties of marrying an ‘alien’ to soldiers hoping to marry.⁴⁴

Planning for war

With the exception of the operations against Indonesian incursions into the Malaysian peninsula and in Borneo between 1963 and 1966, the FESR was never deployed on combat operations. Instead, its role was a ‘force in being’, prepared for whatever emergency might arise, from global war, regional conflict with China or counterinsurgency in Laos or Vietnam. Fundamental to this was an ongoing process of planning, with a series of operational plans produced, amended and discarded as the threats shifted during the Cold War.

British plans for war in Asia during the early 1950s centred on the defence of Malaya. While chastened by its disastrous experience in the opening months of the Pacific War, which ultimately saw the fall of Singapore, the British were beholden to the geographical reality that the easiest place to defend Malaya was the narrow Kra Isthmus, in particular where it narrowed north of the border, in Thailand. During the 1940s and early 1950s, they believed that the Thais would not be able – or willing – to defend their country from a concerted attack. The British therefore planned to move north into Thailand to occupy the so-called ‘Songkhla position’, around 70 kilometres from the border. The political sensitivities of both moving troops into Thailand, and the assumption that most of Thailand would fall to the enemy, placed the British in an awkward position, and made difficult the assessment of the right time to begin moving troops into the area.

43 Matthew Radcliffe, ‘In defence of White Australia: Discouraging “Asian marriage” in post war South-East Asia’, *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 184–201, doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2014.911761.

44 Principal Administrative Officers’ Committee (Personnel), ‘Marriage between service personnel and aliens’, 15 December 1966, NAA: A1946, 1967/3762.

The British planned to meet around 80,000 communists – with the same in reserve – at the Songkhla position. In 1951 they believed they required three divisions, with attached armour and artillery, in addition to internal security forces of around 22 battalions. With other commitments around the world, particularly in Europe, the British would struggle to provide these forces in a timely fashion, with the potential that they would have to rely on the mobilisation of a division from the Territorial Army.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, in the event of a global war, the British Chiefs of Staff revised its estimate upwards of the forces needed to defend the Songkhla position in 1954 to around five divisions, but admitted that it was ‘improbable’ that the United Kingdom could send forces additional to those already in country. Commonwealth contributions were therefore crucial.

Australia committed to sending a corps of three divisions to Malaya, the first of which would arrive three months after war being declared, and the other two at a rate of one per month thereafter. New Zealand agreed to send a single division.⁴⁶ This was a plan that followed the assumptions of the Second World War, in which there was time to mobilise forces to meet a threat. Increasingly, planners worried that this would not be possible. The mismatch of forces was not necessarily a grave issue: in November 1954, the ANZAM Defence Committee estimated that ‘overt aggression in SE Asia is highly unlikely’, but that the main threat facing the Commonwealth in Malaya was an ‘intensification of the cold war and subversive action’.⁴⁷ Reflecting this, the force designated for the defence of the Kra Isthmus – by then called Plan Hermes – was downgraded in 1956 to two divisions, 65 naval vessels and 248 aircraft, but a new plan, Warrior, developed to meet a North Vietnamese and Chinese intervention in the region required four divisions, 600 aircraft and 200 warships.⁴⁸

These plans were designed for the Commonwealth to defend its territory alone; the absence of the United States to these plans lent ‘an air of unreality’ to the process.⁴⁹ While the Commonwealth could, on paper and depending on the threat, potentially go it alone for a period of time, the

45 Gregorian, *The British Army, the Gurkhas and Cold War strategy in the Far East, 1947–1954*, 192.

46 ‘Visit of General Loewen and Admiral Lambe to Australia’, 22 December 1954, UK National Archives: COS(54)393, DEFE 5/55.

47 ANZAM Defence Committee, ‘Probably form and scale of attack against Malaya up to the end of 1956’, November 1954, Australian War Memorial: AWM 121 408/A/1.

48 Damien Fenton, ‘SEATO and the defence of Southeast Asia, 1955–1965’ (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Canberra, 2006), 109–10.

49 *Ibid.*, 110.

difficulties in procuring the troops called for in the plans – a minimum of two divisions for Hermes – made the prospect questionable. Manpower shortages in Britain, the reluctance of Commonwealth nations to commit troops during peacetime, and the time to deploy troops from Britain or elsewhere to Malaya were all factors. In the event of war both Australia and New Zealand, for instance, planned to raise divisions from reserves and volunteers, as they had during the Second World War; a process that would take at least six to nine months.⁵⁰ By 1957 Far East planners recognised that the Commonwealth would be hard pressed to provide adequate conventional forces, and instead sought to redress the balance by the deployment of nuclear weapons in wartime, although these plans similarly were more aspirational than concrete.⁵¹

Accepting that the United States would provide the bulk of troops in any future war (and therefore would direct strategy), the Commonwealth increasingly sought to gauge American intentions in the region and engage them in joint planning. The ANZAM plans were presented to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arthur Radford, for comment in early 1955. The Americans were highly critical of the gap between the plans and the actual ability of the Commonwealth to provide the troops to carry them out, and the plans' focus on defending Malaya and abandoning the rest of Southeast Asia. Refusing a request for four-power joint planning, the Americans insisted on working through SEATO, which had been created just a few months previously, in September 1954. In many ways, coordination with SEATO gave ANZAM's planning new life and the FESR a more concrete role.⁵²

From 1956, SEATO planning began under the auspices of the Military Planning Office. The assembled staff officers from across the region focused their concern on the threat of Chinese and Vietnamese communist aggression against Southeast Asia. It was overt, rather than covert, communist action that was considered to be the principal threat: counterinsurgencies, after all, had been successfully waged in Malaya and the Philippines. The first priorities were therefore those states bordering China and North Vietnam: Laos, South Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia.⁵³

50 Ibid., 111.

51 David French, *Army, empire, and Cold War: The British Army and military policy, 1945–1971* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 245, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199548231.003.0001.

52 Gregorian, *The British Army, the Gurkhas and Cold War strategy in the Far East, 1947–1954*, 117.

53 Fenton, 'SEATO and the defence of Southeast Asia, 1955–1965', 134.

There were two types of potential operation: limited war, which would require part or all of the FESR; and large-scale conflict, which would see the Strategic Reserve deployed initially, with larger follow-on forces from ANZAM nations coming later.⁵⁴ Seven SEATO plans were developed. Plans 1 and 2 prepared for the defence of Southeast Asia, against the Viet Minh, and against North Vietnam and China, respectively. Plan 3 was concerned with the defence of South Vietnam from an attack from North Vietnam with Chinese assistance. Plan 4 was developed against the unlikely possibility of a Chinese attack across the whole of Southeast Asia, while Plan 5 focused on a communist insurgency in Laos. Plan 6 was a variant of other plans against North Vietnamese aggression in Southeast Asia, and Plan 7 prepared for an insurgency in South Vietnam.⁵⁵ While these plans were developed concurrently, those focusing on Laos, Thailand and Vietnam were considered more urgent.⁵⁶

The escalating Laotian crisis, during which communist forces threatened the US-backed Laotian Government, was as close as the FESR came to being deployed in support of SEATO. Indeed, the large-scale training for air movements within 28 Commonwealth Brigade in preparation for such an operation were the first time that the various Australian, British and New Zealand battalions worked closely together.⁵⁷ One concept put forward by the ANZAM Defence Committee would have seen 28 Commonwealth Brigade seizing crossings on the Mekong River while a US airborne brigade took the nearby Laotian town and airfield of Seno.⁵⁸ As the likelihood of a deployment to Laos diminished, this plan (Buckram) morphed into the broader-focused Plan Taffy, which allowed for a deployment to either Laos or northern Thailand in support of Plan 5, and to the Mekong region in support of Plan 4.⁵⁹

ANZAM planners recognised that these plans would meet some difficulty were they to be implemented, and there was ongoing discussion and refinement, with the constantly changing strategic situation adding a degree of uncertainty to the planning process. In the event of the conventional war envisaged in Plan 4, an Australian, New Zealand and UK (ANZUK)

54 MacLean, *ANZIM to ANZUK*, 23.

55 Horner, *Strategic command*, 182.

56 *Ibid.*, 179.

57 Pugsley, *From Emergency to Confrontation*, 176.

58 ANZAM Defence Committee, 'Deployment of the Commonwealth Brigade and Supporting Forces in SEATO Plan 4 Operations', October 1963, NAA: A5799, 49/1963.

59 MacLean, *ANZIM to ANZUK*, 24–26.

Division was to be formed from the Strategic Reserve with an Australian battle group and the New Zealand Brigade. The divisional headquarters was to be Australian.⁶⁰ Ultimately, however, the inability of SEATO members to commit to action in Laos in 1961 also seriously undermined the organisation, and while planning continued, the possibility of deployment under the auspices of SEATO became less likely.⁶¹

The only SEATO-related deployment of Australian forces was the commitment of a squadron of Sabres to Ubon airfield in northern Thailand to protect Thailand's territorial integrity.⁶² Around 220 airmen and officers made up the contingent, operating in basic facilities that amounted to the airstrip, tents and a lone US radar unit. The Sabres' role was to assist in the defence of Thai airspace and the aircraft were armed with Sidewinder missiles and cannon. Two armed Sabres were placed on alert during daylight hours. Ultimately, however, the Ubon-based Sabres never fired a shot in anger. The arrival of US Air Force Eight Tactical Fighter Wing from April 1965 relegated the Sabres, who were not permitted to join the US fight in Vietnam, to a secondary, local defence role.⁶³

Confrontation

With the increase in antagonism between Indonesia and Malaysia that culminated in the period of Confrontation between 1963 and 1966, ANZAM came closest to war; it was also the last time that the Commonwealth planned to meet such an eventuality collectively.⁶⁴ The military strategy of FEC during Indonesian Confrontation was the product of uncertainty about Indonesian intentions, an unstable political situation in Malaysia, a British desire to decrease defence spending and

60 Ibid., 26.

61 Horner, *Strategic command*, 184.

62 Edwards with Pemberton, *Crises and commitments*, 242.

63 Stephens, *The Royal Australian Air Force*, 255–56.

64 Brian Farrell's detailed analysis of Far East Command's planning for Confrontation is by far the best study of that period, and the aims of the Commonwealth nations in developing their plans. Brian Farrell, 'Escalate to terminate: Far East Command and the need to end Confrontation', in *The 2005 Chief of the Army military history conference*, ed. Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (Canberra: Australian Military History Publications, 2005), 125.

free up its stretched military, and the fact that the Commonwealth countries contributing to the defence of Southeast Asia did not always share the same goals.⁶⁵

Australia, for its part, also sought to ensure its own security from its nearest neighbour.⁶⁶ Sharing a border with Indonesia in Papua New Guinea, and with Darwin only a short distance away, war with Indonesia was an occurrence that would quickly and directly affect Australia. While it could refrain from participating in Commonwealth actions against Indonesia or pull its troops out of the Strategic Reserve to bolster home defence, the automatic involvement of Australian interests in any war involving Indonesia meant that full participation in any offensive against Indonesia in an emergency probably offered the best chance of Australian goals being met.⁶⁷

Throughout the conflict with Indonesia, a range of plans were maintained to allow for the ever-changing strategic situation and the uncertainty over Indonesian intentions, while also providing a suite of options for Commonwealth governments and FEC, ranging from open war to the redeployment of troops as in preparation for the possibility of future action or to send a political message to the Indonesians. These plans, at their heart, reflected the desire of Commonwealth planners to resolve the conflict through non-military means; there was no wish to occupy or destroy Indonesia.⁶⁸ The reaction of Commonwealth partners – and therefore their provision of forces to a conflict – had to be considered, as well as that of the world community who might provide support or opprobrium.⁶⁹ Finally, the political reactions of Indonesia were key to each and every plan, with the goal of convincing Indonesian leaders that war would be costly and contrary to their interests. The series of ‘anti-confrontation plans’, as they were termed, therefore, allowed for prompt and proportional Commonwealth reaction to Indonesian actions, rather than the opening blow of a wider conflict.

The Indonesian incursions into Malaya in August 1964 represented the high point of tension between Indonesia and the Commonwealth. The overt nature of these actions also fundamentally changed the nature

65 Ibid., 128–29.

66 See Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 197–204.

67 Farrell, ‘Escalate to terminate’, 136.

68 Ibid., 126.

69 Ibid., 142.

of the conflict. Nonetheless, the Indonesian landings were almost absurdly poorly planned and executed. Indeed, so woeful was the Indonesian planning that many of their forces landed near 28 Commonwealth Brigade, the battalions of which quickly and easily rounded up the Indonesian troops.⁷⁰ However minor, Indonesian actions galvanised the ANZAM partners, and caused them to commit more firmly to FEC and its plans. Equally as important, the British responded by sending additional forces to the region, including bombers, fighters, air defence units and infantry battalions. FEC now had firm plans for strikes against Indonesia, the forces with which to carry them out and the political will to do so.⁷¹

To meet the worst-case scenario, outright war with Indonesia, FEC planners developed a group of plans designed to destroy Indonesian offensive capability as quickly and as completely as possible. Initially named Cougar, the plan went through three more iterations: Hemley, Althorpe and Allvar.⁷² Planners assumed four weeks' notice would be available, and the plan assumed that the United Kingdom would not be engaged in other operations in Southeast Asia at the same time (such that sufficient troops would be available), Indonesia would not receive outside support from countries such as China but nor would the United States intercede on the Commonwealth's behalf, and that nuclear weapons, then based at Singapore, would not be used in the conflict.⁷³

While land forces took the brunt of limited conflicts, it was air forces that would take the lead if the conflict widened under Plan Cougar. Airpower was a key in plans to combat Indonesia; it was through air strikes that a decisive blow might be struck by either side.⁷⁴ Only Indonesia's air force represented a credible threat to Commonwealth forces in the region, and wiping out this capability in the first days of any conflict was seen as crucial. Having recently received 25 new Soviet TU-16 Badger bombers, Indonesia also had around 30 fighters, including MiG-17s, MiG-19s and 18 of the newest MiG-21s, as well as a number of piston-engine aircraft, including 16 P-51 Mustangs and 16 B-25 Mitchell bombers.

70 Dennis and Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation*, 225.

71 Farrell, 'Escalate to terminate', 146, 149–50.

72 ANZAM Defence Committee, 'State of Anti-Confrontation Plans', Agendum No. 9/65, 3 September 1965, Annex J to CINCFE 3182/2064/3, NAA: A7942, A227.

73 Commander in Chief Far East, 'Offensive Operations Against Indonesia: Reinforced Theatre Plan No. 7 (Draft) – Plan Cougar', 1964, NAA: A1945, 245/3/14.

74 Farrell, 'Escalate to terminate', 133.

The main threat to FEC was low-level attacks against the primary FEC bases in the region, at Singapore, Butterworth and in Borneo. Although this was considered unlikely, an airstrike launched by Indonesia with all the forces available to it could come with little warning, and cause a great deal of damage to aircraft caught on the ground and other vital defence installations such as radar and fuel storage areas.⁷⁵

To meet an Indonesian air attack, FEC had a substantial force in theatre, but these initially fell short of what was required as many of the aircraft earmarked for the defence of Malaysia were to be deployed as and when the situation called for it. The plan included a total of 191 aircraft, including 24 medium bombers, 40 light bombers including Canberras, 52 all-weather fighters, 44 ground attack fighters (including RAAF Sabres) and reconnaissance aircraft. Of these, over 100 were already in theatre.⁷⁶ After the Indonesian escalation of the conflict in 1964, more aircraft were provided to FEC, including the powerful Vulcan bombers.⁷⁷ With these forces, FEC had close to the planned capability required to carry out Plan Cougar and could be confident in dealing a crippling blow against Indonesia if called to do so.⁷⁸

More limited strikes were also planned for, should the situation have called for a tough response short of a comprehensive strike. Plan Florid, submitted in 1965, provided for more limited strikes on Indonesian targets in Kalimantan. Indeed, the target list was designed to be scalable, with the plan providing 'the option of ordering operations against any number of targets from one to eighteen according to the degree of severity required'.⁷⁹ Written shortly after the first Indonesian incursion on the Malaysian peninsula, Plan Mason provided for air and naval attacks against Indonesian bases from which paramilitary operations were launched. Plan Hedgehog expanded on Mason as the number of Indonesian bases increased, revising the target list and adding Indonesian military headquarters. Hedgehog was to be implemented 'when Indonesian preparations for attack or infiltration against Malaysia and Singapore were

75 Annex B to Appendix 1, 'Offensive Operations Against Indonesia: Reinforced Theatre Plan No. 7 (Draft) – Plan Cougar', 1964, NAA: A1945, 245/3/14.

76 Farrell, 'Escalate to terminate', 132.

77 Pugsley, *From Emergency to Confrontation*, 228.

78 Farrell, 'Escalate to terminate', 146.

79 ANZAM Defence Committee, 'State of Anti-Confrontation Plans', Agendum No. 9/65, 3 September 1965, Annex J to CINCFE 3182/2064/3, NAA: A7942, A227.

detected'.⁸⁰ Yet further plans provided for more limited scenarios, such as the reinforcement of certain areas; one plan, Salaam, was implemented to move troops to Borneo.⁸¹ The scalability of the plans available for the use of the FESR provide a variety of options for a range of contexts, but all nonetheless reflected FEC's desire to respond in such a way that an ongoing and ever-expanding war was avoided, and a political settlement might be reached through the precise application of force.

Conclusion

For a decade before the Vietnam War, Australia prepared to fight a conventional war in Southeast Asia. The FESR was ANZAM's contribution to SEATO and the force that allowed it a seat at the planning table. While at the strategic level Australia and the Commonwealth contributed to SEATO planning and alliance management, on the ground preparations for a regional war in Southeast Asia sometimes took second place to more pressing operational needs, such as the Malayan Emergency. Only after operations against communist guerrillas wound down did the FESR focus more energy on SEATO operations; by that time, political considerations made a deployment increasingly unlikely.

The plans developed by FEC to confront the Indonesian threat contrasted with its involvement in SEATO. First and foremost, the Commonwealth expected to fight Indonesia alone. Unlike British plans to defend the Kra Isthmus by itself, however, anti-confrontation plans were far more credible. The threat was clear, and it was immediate. Indeed, Indonesia had tipped its hand with incursions in Malaya. The plans themselves were closely aligned with political goals, which were most evident in their scalability. Importantly, the Commonwealth had the forces on hand to achieve its goals, particularly in terms of its air forces.

Confrontation was the FESR's zenith. At a time when the Australian armed forces were undergoing substantial change as they grappled with the postwar strategic landscape, the forces sent to the FESR were a well-balanced contribution that achieved their desired goals of deterrence

80 ANZAM Defence Committee, 'State of Anti-Confrontation Plans', Agendum No. 9/65, 3 September 1965, Annex J to CINCFE 3182/2064/3, NAA: A7942, A227.

81 Commander in Chief Far East, 'Offensive Operations Against Indonesia: Reinforced Theatre Plan No. 7 (Draft) – Plan Cougar', 1964, NAA: A1945, 245/3/14. These plans included Nightrider, Buxom, Haycock and Spillikin.

and alliance maintenance. However, the British 'East of Suez' policy, and the US and Australian focus on Vietnam saw the force decline even before Australia's decision to focus on the defence of the continent. Commonwealth involvement in the region continued briefly with the creation of the ANZUK force of around 7,000 from 1971, but this was disbanded in 1975. Australian forces remained in the region for some time longer: while Butterfield air base was handed to the Malaysian Government in 1971, RAAF squadrons were based there until 1988 and the Australian Army continues periodic rotations of a rifle company to Butterworth. These vestigial involvements reflect the continued importance of the peninsula to Australia's defence, and the origin of this involvement in the structures and relationships set in place during the 1950s and 1960s.

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