

The Defence Theory of Relativity

Brian Cooper

Reviewed by Dr Mark Thomson

For eight years now, the Australian Defence Force has been busier than at anytime since the late 1960s. As a result, the long-running debate over the size, shape and employment of the ADF has become more active, and in many ways more concrete, than for several decades. It is an important and complex debate, spanning a range of interplaying factors from geopolitics through to the technical details of the military arts and sciences. Brian Cooper's latest book, *The Defence Theory of Relativity*, is a timely and valuable contribution to this debate. Cooper, a retired brigadier, has long been one of the more original and insightful writers on Australian defence and strategic policy, and this book draws together many of the threads of his previous writing.

The Defence Theory of Relativity is essentially a collection of essays, twenty-seven in all, of which three are actual submissions to recent parliamentary inquiries. Collected into four chapters, the essays range from a discussion of the command styles of great generals including Alexander the Great and Hannibal, through to a close examination of the strengths and weaknesses of plans for developing the ADF. Covering such a breadth of material in only 198 pages inevitably means that the many topics are only explored to a limited depth. But what is missing by way of detail, is more than made up for by some fresh and original ideas.

The sheer breadth of material means that individual readers are certain to find something relevant to their interests. I personally found Cooper's discussion of Australia's defence capabilities to be the highlight of the book. Melding together a sound assessment of the emerging strategic demands on the ADF with a concrete understanding of military technology, he delivers a series of arguments that warrant close examination.

On the future Army, Cooper argues for flexibility and adequate firepower to do the job. Usefully, he explores at some length the rationale for, and details of, hardening and networking the land force. Not surprisingly, he also argues for more soldiers. As he says; 'Australian soldiers are great but they are still human – and we need more of them.' On the question of tanks, Cooper is at his best. Using clarity of argument not often encountered in the acrimonious tank debate in Australia, he sets out the case for a purpose-built vehicle equipped with a 35mm cannon that would be lighter than the Abrams main battle tank now entering service.

As a former army aviator, Cooper is well qualified to discuss the development of ADF air capabilities and three essays are devoted to this topic. While all three are worthwhile, two stand out. The first examines, in typically innovative fashion, the potential for transport aircraft to be used as 'transport-bombers' to carry and dispense advanced munitions. Proposed as a complement rather than as a replacement to the currently planned Joint Strike Fighter, transport-bombers would appear to hold the potential to

extend the range and capacity of ADF strike at an affordable cost.

The second deals with the further development of a strategic air-lift capability for the ADF. Although the decision has been taken and the new C-17 strategic airlift aircraft are now entering service, Cooper's analysis of the range of strategic airlift options begs many questions about the rapid decision to acquire the C-17 – a decision that was made behind closed doors with minimal public visibility.

Also included in *The Defence Theory of Relativity* is Cooper's thought provoking submission to the Joint Standing Committee on ADF Regional Air Superiority. Using publicly available information, Cooper succinctly encapsulates the present controversy over the planned purchase of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and sets out a series of commonsense questions that are yet to be answered. This is as good an example as any of Cooper's analytic approach. He begins with the strategic basics and then explores the options through an appreciation of the technical characteristics of weapons systems and the practicalities of modern warfare.

In the space available for this review, it is not possible to do justice to each and every one of the topics included in the book. While this review has briefly explored some of the interesting force structure issues that the book covers, it could have equally dwelt on the very original thoughts presented on geopolitics. These include a critical examination of US foreign policy, the consequences of a rising China, and the role of Australia in the regional security order.

There's no escaping the fact that the book adopts an unconventional approach to a number of issues, but that is its strength. While the recent debate on defence and strategic issues in Australian has been active and healthy, it has also been restricted to a limited range of perspectives. Cooper's book opens up the debate and subjects it to some truly original analysis. In doing so, he attacks each issue on its merits and is not afraid to follow arguments to their logical conclusion – even when the endpoint might be an uncomfortable one.

The Defence Theory of Relativity comes well recommended with a foreword by General Peter Cosgrove and chapter introductions by John Essex-Clark, Keith Suter, Jim Wallace and Michael McKinley that set the context for the essays that follow. The book is well set out, tightly edited and illustrated throughout with black and white images.

If you want a book that provides a comforting and tidy explanation of emerging Australian strategic policy and defence planning, this is not the book for you. On the other hand, if you are looking for an original perspective on the challenge of defending Australia in the 21st century, *The Defence Theory of Relativity* would be an excellent place to start. ♦

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