

6

The Importance of Geography

Robert Ayson

At the end of an article in which he explains why geography should matter in Australian defence policymaking, Paul Dibb resumed a long-standing duel. Citing Alan Dupont's argument that the confines of Australia's location should matter less and its wider interests and values rather more, Dibb's assessment is typically caustic: 'explain to me', he demands, 'just how we are going to defend our values in Myanmar and the People's Republic of China or our trade interests in such far-flung parts of the world as Nigeria or Argentina?'¹

But in the several years over which I was a colleague of Dibb's at The Australian National University (ANU) I was struck by the energy and consistency of his criticism of another counterpart in the Australian strategic debate. This unlucky person was Senator Robert Hill who, from 2001 to 2006, was Defence Minister under Prime Minister John Howard. Clearly holding Hill personally and principally responsible for what he saw as a confusion and refutation of the geographical logic that had underpinned Australian strategy since the early 1970s, Dibb's attacks were frequent and severe (and the vocabulary was even more colourful in hallway conversations at ANU than it was in print).

1 Paul Dibb, 'Is Strategic Geography Relevant to Australia's Current Defence Policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Jun. 2006), p. 262.

By the time he was writing the article just cited, Hill had resigned from the Senate, an event that was undoubtedly a cause for celebration in the Dibb household. For all we know it may even have been the occasion for the purchase of another in a long list of German motorcars. Even once that change had occurred, however, Dibb showed little mercy in his assessment of Hill's legacy, stating that, during his time in office, Hill 'presided over a force structure development that lacked rigorous intellectual prioritization'² — one of the deadly sins in Dibb's universe of strategic thinking. In Dibb's view, Hill consistently confused 'our broader strategic interests with our vital defence interests'.³ Elsewhere he recounted another apparent transgression: Hill 'seemed to be more interested in the foreign policy aspects of the Defence portfolio'.⁴ So much, then, for diplomacy, which appears much less important to Dibb for the protection of Australia's vital interests than intelligence assessment (his own original area of work) and defence capability (which would become an increasing focus as his career blossomed).

The basis of Dibb's criticism is not difficult to locate. Hill was 'responsible ... for seriously undermining the logical strategic priorities of our force structure' because he had ignored the importance of Australia's geography.⁵ In fact Hill had done even worse; in Dibb's view he had deliberately argued that in an age of global security threats, exemplified by the World Trade Center attacks of September 2001 (9/11), geography was essentially irrelevant. By unpicking the carefully honed logic of geography, which had served Australia well since the end of the days of forward defence, ad hoc policymaking in this crucial part of the Howard era gave rise to such dangerous notions that Australia could even have vital interests in the Middle East. That was far too far from Australia's neighbourhood for Dibb.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of geographical considerations in Dibb's approach to strategy and defence policy decision-making, especially, but not only, in the case of Australia.

2 Dibb, 'Strategic Geography' (2006), p. 248.

3 Dibb, 'Strategic Geography' (2006), p. 252.

4 Paul Dibb, 'The Self-Reliant Defence of Australia: The History of an Idea', in Ron Huisken & Meredith Thatcher (eds), *History as Policy: Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 167 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), p. 22.

5 Dibb, 'The Self-Reliant Defence of Australia' (2007), p. 22.

In later writing he anticipates the concerns of some about his analysis by protesting that '[n]ation states do not find themselves in a geographical straitjacket'.⁶ Just two pages later, however, Dibb insists that 'the consistent application of strategic geography should be an iron discipline for a country with Australia's modest size[d] defence force'.⁷ Little room for choice is left for determining the sort of capabilities that Australia requires: 'The characteristics of the archipelago to our north ... demand', he writes, 'that we be able to deploy air, naval and land forces there.'⁸ Elsewhere he writes that for Australia:

Concepts of operations have to be assessed on the contribution they can make to the unique problems in defending a large continent with extensive maritime surrounds and flanked by the archipelagic chain to the north.⁹

There is more than a hint of material determinism in these passages. The overriding message appears to be that if the straitjacket of strategic geography fits, Australia needs to be wearing it.

According to Dibb, Australia's straitjacket is not a one-size-fits-all garment but, rather, is a specially crafted piece of clothing that offers permanent restraint to its singular wearer: 'Our unique strategic geography will not disappear.' Dibb's view of the importance of strategic geography is connected to one of the main organising concepts for Australian thinking in the late 1990s, which he helped popularise:

What I have called the 'arc of instability' to our north ... promises to confront us with even more challenging contingencies than those we have experienced recently in East Timor and Solomon Islands. These are abiding strategic interests for Australia.¹⁰

6 Paul Dibb, 'The Importance of the Inner Arc to Australian Defence Policy and Planning', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2012), p. 14.

7 Dibb, 'The Importance of the Inner Arc' (2012), p. 16.

8 Dibb, 'The Importance of the Inner Arc' (2012), p. 255.

9 Paul Dibb, *The Conceptual Basis of Australia's Defence Planning and Force Structure Development*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 88 (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1992), p. 23.

10 Dibb, 'The Self-Reliant Defence of Australia' (2007), p. 24. Dibb's influential depictions of that arc of instability in the wake of the collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia included one special piece of geopolitical hyperbolae that 'a balkanised Indonesia, a broken-backed Papua New Guinea and a weak New Zealand are very real prospects'. Paul Dibb, David D. Hale & Peter Prince, 'Asia's Insecurity', *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), p. 18.

That last sentence, and the logic which informs it, is crucial. If Australia's strategic geography is unique, and if that same strategic geography shapes Australia's abiding (and truly vital) interests, then it follows that Australia's abiding interests are also unique.¹¹ One finds in Dibb's work few references to that frequent reference point of liberal thinkers: the common interests that can unite countries in common endeavour. Dibb finds reassurance not in the possibility of concerts of power or effective regional security mechanisms for a changing Asia, but in what he regards as the consistent pursuit of their interests by self-regarding nation-states. Nothing more and nothing less should be expected or required from Australia.¹²

This also means that even the closest of allies, who presumably have their own unique geographies and interests, may be limited in the extent to which they are ready to come to anyone else's assistance. Indeed, as Dibb observes in citing the work of T.B. Millar (the founding Director of The Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC)), Canberra's recognition of the limits of likely American support in a tricky immediate neighbourhood helped give rise to Australia's enthusiasm for a defence force that was able to operate independently closer to home. In the 1960s this meant recognising 'the possibility of Australian forces being required to act without the assistance of the United States against any future Indonesian threats to Papua New Guinea'.¹³

It must be remarked here that Dibb does see major powers as belonging to a different category in terms of their willingness and drive to exert their much stronger military power globally, and in some of the

11 To continue that theme of uniqueness, Dibb has also argued that 'In the absence of a threat, the Australian defence community has developed a unique conceptual basis for defence planning and force-structure development which reflects Australia's geography, the nature of the sea and air approaches to the continent, and the characteristics of regional military capabilities and potentialities.' Dibb, *The Conceptual Basis* (1992), p. xv.

12 In a possible and somewhat unexpected exception, Dibb argued in the early 1980s that Australia needed to be more aware of the concerns of developing countries in its neighbourhood, which included calls for justice. He chided Australia for ignoring these and other demands, not for some altruistic purpose but instead because to do so would be in 'Australia's long term interests'. Paul Dibb, 'Introduction', in Paul Dibb (ed.), *Australia's External Relations in the 1980s, The Interaction of Economic, Political and Strategic Factors* (New York: Croom Helm Australia and St Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 12–13.

13 Dibb, 'The Importance of the Inner Arc' (2012), p. 17.

capabilities (including nuclear weapons) that they possessed.¹⁴ His long-standing study of Russia (about which more will be said later) was part of the inspiration, and this helped bring Australia into consideration. Geography meant that Russia's main interests were also concentrated closer to home, 'on the main land mass of continental Asia, particularly with those countries that are near to Soviet territory or which are capable of mounting (or supporting) military strikes against the Russian homeland', he wrote less than half a decade before the Soviet Union collapsed. But, at the same time, he observed '[t]he USSR is a global power with world-wide interests',¹⁵ which meant an interest in events far away, including in Australia and New Zealand, two allies of Moscow's main Cold War foe.

Anyone who has listened to Dibb speaking will have heard him referring to the real threat analysis of those Cold War years, when the West was faced with the awesome strikepower of the formidable Soviet nuclear arsenal. Dibb treated nuclear weapons as special partly because, unlike so many other factors in the strategic environment, these systems were genuinely able to transcend geography when mated to long-range delivery systems. They therefore preceded (and trumped) the exaggerations about security in a world of globalisation that had so beguiled what he regarded as lesser Australian minds.

Dibb did recognise the immediate impact of the attacks on the World Trade Center twin towers in New York and the Pentagon, Washington, in September 2001.¹⁶ He noted the effect that these events had on American thinking as Washington contemplated 'the threat from a small group of individuals, without a major power behind them, which has proved capable of inflicting death and damage on a horrendous scale'.¹⁷ But he was less worried about the damage that the terrorists could do to the West in material terms than he was about America's willingness to be distracted from its main purpose as a great power:

14 The principal outworking of this logic is a superb monograph that, in my opinion, is his best piece of published writing. See Paul Dibb, *Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia*, Adelphi Paper No. 295 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1995).

15 Paul Dibb, 'Soviet Strategy Towards Australia, New Zealand and the Southwest Pacific', *Australian Outlook*, Aug. 1985, p. 69.

16 See Paul Dibb, 'The Future of International Coalitions', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2002), pp. 129–44.

17 Paul Dibb, *The Future Balance of Power in East Asia: What are the Geopolitical Risks?*, Working Paper No. 406 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2008), p. 7.

We saw in the Cold War how one-eyed America's policies could be: the United States brooked no other subject of national security warranting serious attention. There is a risk that we are not in a similar period of US preoccupation, just when serious geopolitical challenges are set to emerge in East Asia.¹⁸

There was a message here not just for thinkers in Washington, but for anyone in Canberra who Dobb felt had become dangerously obsessed by the war on terror. And, unlike the great powers, Australia did not have the sheer material base to spend too much time on matters away from its own neighbourhood. Instead, the iron discipline of geography mattered even more to Australia because of its inherent limitations, which in comparison to the few major players he had no hesitation in depicting as a one of the region's 'smaller powers'.¹⁹

The Dobb Review and All That

The idea that geography bequeathed Australia a unique position in the world in general, and in Asia more particularly, and that it put particular and unquestioning demands on Australia's defence requirements is most famously conveyed in the review Dobb wrote for Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke's Defence Minister, Kim Beazley.²⁰ Its author is a little shy about the publicity that is still often given to that work, but I do not think he minds people mentioning it as much as he sometimes indicates. I think his concern is that they may think it is the only thing he has done. Dobb is rightly respected for constructing such a cogent and influential document that crystallised the tone of the past decade or more of Australian strategic thinking.

The review is of Australia's defence capability requirements. And, like the 1987 Australian Defence White Paper that it helped to inspire, the capability question is always the \$64 million — or, closer to the point, the multi-billion dollar — one for defence planning. But Dobb's review would simply not hold together without the geographical logic that

18 Dobb, *The Future Balance of Power in East Asia* (2008), p. 11.

19 For that depiction, see Paul Dobb, 'The Strategic Inter-relations of the US, the USSR and China in the East Asia-Pacific Area', *Australian Outlook* (Aug. 1978), p. 181.

20 Paul Dobb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, report to the Minister for Defence (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986).

underpins so much of the reasoning. If Australia wanted to get serious about the question of strategic guidance, then there was one main answer. 'There is a requirement', Dibb writes:

To study more seriously the effect of our geography on force development. Because of its proximity, the archipelago to our north is the area from which a conventional military threat to the security of Australian territory could most easily be posed. A thorough understanding of the air and sea gap to our north, and of Australia's northern hinterland, will enable us to take account of the limitations and risks that geography places on any attacking force.²¹

In this sense, at least, geography was the Australian defence planner's friend, and that defence planner should exploit that friendship for the advantages it offered. 'The sea gap to our north', the review continues, 'is a formidable barrier to any enemy, and the problems of crossing it need to be assessed thoroughly.'²² In combination with other geographical constraints (for adversaries rather than for Australia at this point), this was a crucial explanation for Dibb's advice that Australia focus on lower level challenges to its sovereign interests: 'There are few nations', he observes, 'that could undertake such hazardous and exposed operations.'²³

But some of the very same material factors were complications for Australia in its ability to project military power, and they were complications that could not be ignored. In the preceding section Dibb takes this point on directly. Raging against the machine, he cries out that '[m]uch of what are presented as national security interests are basically current political perceptions of what is favourable and unfavourable'.²⁴ Instead, the formula should lie in the political aims stemming from material authority:

Definition of our national security interests should begin with the statement that the exercise of authority over our land territory, territorial sea and airspace is fundamental to our sovereignty and security. The size of our continent and the location of some external island territories makes this a formidable task.²⁵

21 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 38.

22 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 38.

23 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 38.

24 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 36.

25 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), pp. 36–37.

Dibb returns to this point as an enduring theme for the determination of an appropriate defence force posture for Australia:

An important and recurring theme of this Review is the need to concentrate force structure priorities on our area of direct military interest. This area stretches over 4000 nautical miles from the Cocos Islands in the west to New Zealand and the islands of the South West Pacific in the east and over 3000 nautical miles from the archipelago and island chain in the north to the Southern Ocean. Defending such a large area is a formidable task.²⁶

The Russia Expert

An interesting common theme in Dibb's thinking, which goes beyond the 1986 review, is his application of the idea of an area of primary strategic interest defined by one's immediate geography to his depiction of Russia's priorities. This is unsurprising, given that the work of which Dibb is most proud, his study of the Soviet Union, was published in the same year as the Dibb Review.²⁷ But the research underpinning that book stretched back further than the concentrated period of one year that he had to work on his review. Thus, it is not unreasonable to argue that the roots of Dibb's assessment of Australia's strategic geography lie somewhere much further away than the archipelagic screen.

In fact, while economic and political problems are one of the central reasons for Dibb's assessment of the Soviet Union as an *incomplete* superpower, geographical challenges also loom prominently in his explanation. Having both cited and challenged Sir Halford J. Mackinder's prescription of the control of Eurasia as a sure basis for world power, Dibb argues that the location and expanse of Soviet Russian territory is as much a curse as it is a blessing:

The great geographical spread of the USSR — from Europe in the west and the Middle East in the south to China and Japan in the east — makes the USSR a primary factor in the security considerations of many neighbouring countries. Sometimes this proximity works to the

26 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 57.

27 Paul Dibb, *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies and Macmillan, 1986).

advantage of the USSR (as in the case of Eastern Europe, Mongolia and even Finland), but it can also cause suspicion and hostility (as with China, Japan, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey).²⁸

Unlike Australia, it was not the politics of other governments (i.e. the one in Jakarta) that was most likely to cause that antagonism in the neighbourhood. It was Russia's policies themselves that were causing many of the problems. Soviet Russia gets a backhanded compliment: 'Geopolitically the USSR has succeeded in realizing its worst fears by ensuring that it is surrounded with enemies on virtually every side.'²⁹ Moscow's political choices mattered. But, again, geography was the necessary (if not the sufficient) condition for these problems. Dibb argued earlier that: 'The very vastness of the Russian land mass allows for the existence of powerful and almost inevitably unsympathetic nations around the Soviet periphery.'³⁰ In a play on Mackinder, which turned Eurasia from an asset into a liability, geography was very nearly the Soviet Union's destiny.

But this was not unchanging, as if what had limited (and advantaged) Russia yesterday would always limit it (and advantage it) tomorrow. Geography always matters, but the parts of a country's geography that matter most can shift. Here Dibb pointed to the increasingly important role of Siberia in Russia's strategic geography. This was partly due to that area's energy and resource wealth and what this would mean for the Soviet Union's economic future. It was also due to Siberia's proximity to China, which for Dibb is an almost perpetual strategic competitor for Russia. And, with Siberia, the mix of strategic geographical pros and cons, which would become a pattern in Dibb's thinking more generally, come through loud and clear:

Seen from the Kremlin, Siberia is a distant possession flanked by hostile states. There is a keen awareness that Siberia is a large and resource-rich domain, but that it is sparsely populated and has poorly developed and vulnerable transport links with the European USSR. Moreover, it shares a very long border with 1 billion Chinese and is close to Japan, the major ally of the US in the Pacific.³¹

28 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 22.

29 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 133–34.

30 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 22.

31 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 55.

The parallels should be clear by now. With its vast expanses, its huge distance from the most populated areas of the country and its own sparse demography (and a hostile climate to boot), and abutting the maritime areas where putative adversaries exist, the north of the island continent of Australia is to Canberra what Siberia is to Moscow. Just as Siberia 'abuts on the populous Asian civilizations of China and Japan',³² the same might be said of the northern reaches of Australia in relation to the populous Indonesia (where a Javanese civilisation is part of its make-up). *The Incomplete Superpower* is, in this sense, the model for the Dobb Review. Dobb's assertion that '[t]here is a certain unease in Moscow about the longterm security of Siberia',³³ is not far from what he wished Canberra to feel about Australia's northern stretches and approaches. Maybe Australia's strategic geography wasn't quite so unique after all.³⁴

In favour of the hypothesis that there was something Russian in the water when Dobb was thinking about Australia is the fact that Russia, and Siberia in particular, have not been passing enthusiasms.³⁵ Not only was Siberia the *future* for the concentration of Russian strategic effort (just as he wanted Australia to shift more of the focus of its defence force towards the far north, where it could sit close to the sea-air gap), Russia, and Siberia in particular, also formed the *past* for much of Dobb's published research effort.

The earliest of Dobb's publications that can be readily found is an ANU occasional paper on Soviet agriculture from 1969, which features tables on such glamorous subjects as sugar beet, potato and

32 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 56.

33 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 55.

34 There may have been triplets. In the early 1980s, writing while Deputy Director of Australia's Joint Intelligence Organisation, Dobb observed that 'China's vast territory and huge population offer both strategic advantages and disadvantages to its leaders ... Beijing must feel confident that the natural barrier provided by the sea in the east, couple with the extensive presence of military and paramilitary forces in the coastal areas, makes a major assault from this direction remote ... Also, the nearly impenetrable Himalayas opposite India free China from major concern over threats to its heartland from that direction. Only in the north and north-east does geography complicate Beijing's defence planning, with major areas susceptible to Soviet air and ground attack. Even there, however, the mountainous nature of the terrain narrows the avenues of approach available to an invader and allows Chinese forces to be prepositioned to block historical attack routes'. Paul Dobb, 'China's Strategic Situation and Defence Priorities in the 1980s', *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 5 (1981), p. 99.

35 Of course Russia has been nothing less than a continuing passion. For a return to his favourite subject but under a title which was not of the author's choosing, see Paul Dobb, 'The Bear is Back', *American Interest*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2006), pp. 78-85.

wheat production.³⁶ But, three years later, Dibb published his first book, a sector by sector study of Siberia that, early on, displays the hallmarks of its author's geographical emphasis, even to the point of putting the most advanced of military capabilities in context. 'The lack of compactness of the USSR, its great longitudinal extent, and the disparate location of population and industry in Siberia are positive strategic assets', writes Dibb. And yet, in the very next sentence we again catch that glimpse of the yin and yang of strategic geography. 'The dangers of a conventional invasion across permeable land frontiers from neighbouring China, which ironically the USSR itself helped to industrialize in the 1960s,' he continues, 'may thus be of more real concern to Moscow than the theoretical implications of nuclear attack.'³⁷ Moreover, right at the front of this early volume comes a hint that there is something to one of the parallels suggested above when Dibb compares the spread of human habitation of Siberia with a more local example. In Eastern Siberia, he writes: 'The distribution of population is about 3.3 persons per square mile, which may be compared with a sparsely populated country such as Australia with over 4 persons per square mile.'³⁸

Conclusion

To resort to Isaiah Berlin's typology, Paul Dibb is more of a hedgehog (a thinker who focuses on one big idea) and less of a fox (who knows many).³⁹ Dibb's big idea is that material factors are the things that matter for understanding a country's outlook on security and for determining its defence posture. Principal among these material factors is a country's geography. Most of Dibb's career has been spent pondering the impact of the unique strategic geographies of two countries: his adopted home in Australia and the vast country he was so drawn to in Russia. Readers of *The Incomplete Superpower* may be surprised that someone who is often assumed to be focused on questions of defence

36 See Paul Dibb, *Soviet Agriculture since Khrushchev*, Occasional Paper No. 4, Department of Political Science, Research School of Social Sciences (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1969), p. 8.

37 Paul Dibb, *Siberia and the Pacific, a Study in Economic Development and Trade Prospects* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 17.

38 Dibb, *Siberia and the Pacific* (1972), p. 5.

39 Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), p. 1.

capability should spend so much time on the non-military material bases of power: geography, economics and demography. The first of these factors was needed to show what sort of defence capabilities it made sense for a country to develop. The second and third shaped what scale of that defence undertaking would be possible.

If there was a calculation of threats it began with these material factors. Politics was then the variable which came on top of these to determine whether friendship or enmity would result. Indonesia was important to Australia, Dibb argued, because of inescapable material factors: 'simple prudence suggests', he wrote in the early 1980s, 'that Indonesia is the only country with the size, the proximity and the potential in the longer term for significant assault against Australia.'⁴⁰ But it would be its politics that would decide whether these material factors turned it into a friend or foe. Dibb wrote recently:

We have got used to the fact that Indonesia's military forces have little in the way of strategic reach. Over the next two or three decades that may change if there are sustained high rates of economic growth and higher defence budgets ... A well armed, unfriendly Indonesia would be a first order strategic challenge for Australia and would preoccupy us to the exclusion of practically every other defence planning issue. On the other hand, a well-armed friendly Indonesia would be a security asset for Australia and the region.⁴¹

Politics matter. Yet, without economic strength, and the military power it affords, Indonesia cannot be a great power. This continues to be relevant to Canberra because of Indonesia's unique place in Australia's unique strategic geography.

As a hedgehog, and a very able one, Dibb's single-minded focus has been intimidating to those unfortunate enough to get in his way. He has little patience for those who, in his view, have failed to give a rigorous accounting of a country's vital interests grounded in a crystal-clear assessment of material factors (hence the importance of intelligence analysis). This makes Dibb something of a determinist, and someone who takes an approach to the relationship between material factors and force structure the way a Marxist sees the relationship between material economic factors and politics. Power matters, and the material

40 Paul Dibb, 'Issues in Australian Defence', *Australian Outlook* (Dec. 1983), p. 162.

41 Dibb, 'The Importance of the Inner Arc' (2012), p. 28.

sources of power matter most. Hence the instructions given by Dibb to one of the SDSC's longest-serving administrators that he should not be bothered by invitations to converse with representatives of 'PACs' (piss-ant countries). But that rigour also meant that he had a clear sense of how much was enough. A country's defence posture was not only energised by geography, demography and economics, it should be controlled by these factors as well.

Two examples serve to illustrate this logic. The first is from the subject of his original and primary affection. 'The Soviet presence in East Asia and her status as a world power are inextricably combined', he wrote for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in the early 1980s. 'Unlike the US, the USSR cannot even consider withdrawing from a part of the world where nearly 30 million of her people live in a territory vital to her economy.'⁴² The second comes in the conclusion to what Dibb has described as 'an historic document',⁴³ the Dibb Review begins its close with these surprisingly upbeat lines:

Australia is one of the most secure countries in the world. It is distant from the main centres of global military confrontation, and it is surrounded by large expanses of water which make it difficult to attack. Australia shares no land borders with any other nation, it does not stand astride any vital international sea lanes, nor does it control crucial maritime choke points.⁴⁴

Is Australia's relative security a reality in Dibb's view because of the extent of its defence force? The answer is no. Is it secure because of its alliance with the United States? The answer again is no. Does Australia's security come to it by virtue of its stable democratic politics? No. Because of the strength of its economy and the size of its population (other material factors)? No and no. The solitary answer is quite clear. That answer is geography.

42 Paul Dibb, 'Soviet Capabilities, Interests and Strategies in East Asia in the 1980s', *Survival*, Jul./Aug. 1982, pp. 155–62, p. 156.

43 Dibb, 'The Self-Reliant Defence of Australia' (2007), p. 18.

44 Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (1986), p. 174.

This text is taken from *Geography, Power, Strategy and Defence Policy: Essays in Honour of Paul Dibb*, edited by Desmond Ball and Sheryn Lee, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.