STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

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The Strategy Behind Gallipoli:

Strategic decision-making in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli

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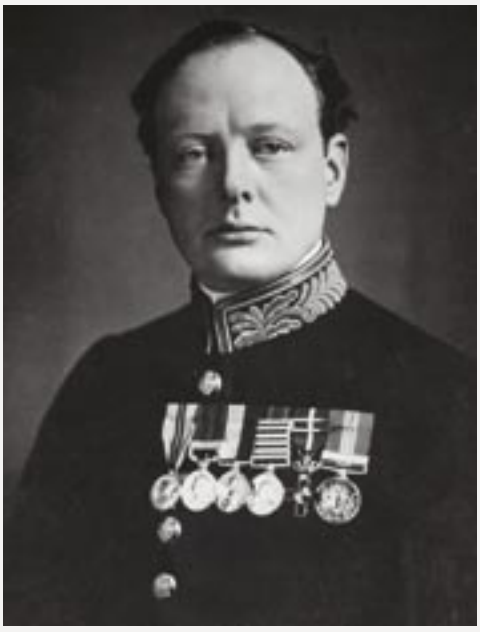
by Robin Prior

ASPI is pleased to present the first of an occasional series of STRATEGIC INSIGHTS re-examining key strategic policy decision-making in the past.

The strategic origins of the Gallipoli operation are to be found in the determination of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to use the navy decisively to influence the war on land, in the willingness of the British War Council and many of its advisors to believe that sea power could achieve this end, and in an underestimation by all concerned on the determination with which the enemy (Turkey) would defend its homeland.



Winston Churchill, First Lord of the British Admiralty during World War I. © APL

Although Churchill's schemes were many and various they had one factor in common: they sought not just to defeat the German fleet but to use British naval power to shorten the duration of the war on land.

Churchill had taken up his post in 1911 to ensure that a reluctant navy complied with the plans of the army to escort an expeditionary force to France in the event of war. By September 1914 this feat had been accomplished (without the loss of a single soldier). Naval units were then engaged in sweeping up small squadrons of German ships in distant seas, ensuring that vital supplies of food and war materiel of all kinds carried in unarmed merchant ships arrived safely in Britain and in maintaining offensive patrols in the North Sea to keep watch on the German fleet.

None of this proved very congenial to Churchill. His restless mind had been devising a series of more offensive operations for his ships since the outbreak of the war. Although his schemes were many and various they had one factor in common: they sought not just to defeat the German fleet but to use British naval power to shorten the duration of the war on land.

One of Churchill's schemes involved the capture of an island off the German coast, thus forcing the German fleet to sally forth and retake it. This would bring about a major naval battle which the British would win. The fleet would then enter the Baltic where in combination with Russian forces they would dominate the north German coast and force the Germans to divert troops from the Western Front. Another scheme involved the British fleet assisting the army to advance along the Belgian coast by acting as a kind of mobile, heavy artillery on its flank. Yet another plan saw the navy blockading the Dutch into the war and accruing an ally behind the flank of the German forces in the West.

None of these plans got off the drawing board for a simple reason: they all involved risking the heavy units of the Grand Fleet on which British supremacy at sea rested in shallow waters, infested by mines and susceptible to attack by German torpedo boats. Whatever the theoretical merits of these plans, no admiral was prepared to sanction operations which risked Britain's ability to prosecute the war.

While Churchill's plans for a naval offensive were falling by the wayside the war was entering an indecisive phase. The German assault in the west had been stymied at the Marne; the Russian armies had suffered grievously at Tannenburg and the Masaurian Lakes but were still in the field; French operations against Germany, Austrian operations against Serbia and Turkish operations against Egypt had collapsed almost at inception.

And these setbacks to the armed forces of the major powers had been accompanied by some ominous developments. Small groups of soldiers in rudimentary defences and armed only with repeating rifles had proved capable of stopping attacks by masses of infantrymen. The appearance of trenches and a few machine guns reduced even further the chances of advancing troops. Stalemate started to enter the vocabularies of the general staff.

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Politicians and strategists on all sides greeted this spectacle of war without end with alarm. On the British side three men brought forth new strategic conceptions which were designed to surmount the problem. If there was no way through the Western Front they reasoned, there must be a way around.

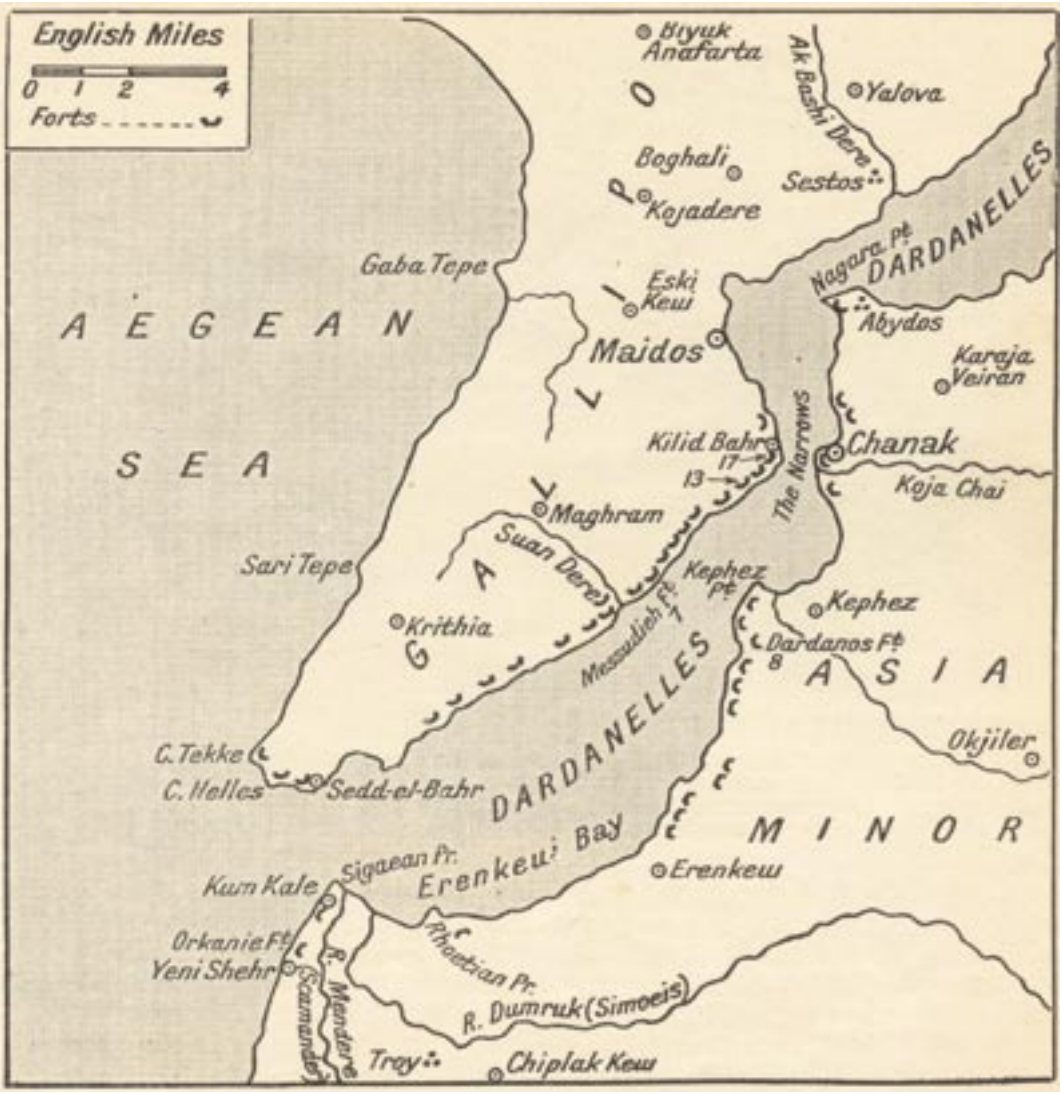
First in the field was Lloyd George. He considered that Germany's allies should be attacked—Austria-Hungary by a force consisting of the Balkan states led by Britain and France landing on the Dalmatian coast and advancing on Vienna. In addition a landing should be made on the Syrian coast to cut off the Turkish Army in the vicinity of the Suez Canal. Thus Germany would be brought down by a process of ' knocking the props under her'.[1]

Yet another person associated with the Government, Lieutenant-Colonel Hankey, an ex-marine and secretary of the War Council had also conjured up an alliance of Balkan states, including Greece and Bulgaria. He thought that with these states

on board it might be possible 'to weave a web round Turkey which shall end her career as a European Power'.[2] He thought that if Roumania and Russia could be enticed into the coalition 'the occupation of Constantinople, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus' could be accomplished. Thus communications would be restored with Russia via the Black Sea. Three British army corps combined with the Balkan and Russian forces should be sufficient to achieve these ends.[3]

The third person to dabble in grand strategy was Lord Fisher, First Sea Lord at the Admiralty and Churchill's chief naval adviser. He advocated a gigantic war against Turkey involving a coalition of Balkan states, a Greek army landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula and the navy forcing the Dardanelles with squadrons of obsolete battleships appearing off Constantinople and compelling the surrender of the pro-German government.

At the same time that Churchill was being bombarded by 'Turkey' memoranda from



Dardanelles and the Gallipoli peninsula were the scenes first of naval attacks and later of fierce battles on land. The forts on either side of the Straits were bombarded, but the warships failed to force a passage.

various quarters, other events were directing his thoughts towards the Dardanelles. On 1 January the British ambassador in Russia had telegraphed to the Foreign Office that the Grand Duke had informed him that Russian forces were being hard pressed by the Turks in the Caucasus and that the Grand Duke had asked if 'it would be possible for Lord Kitchener to arrange for a demonstration of some kind against the Turk elsewhere, either naval or military [to] ease the position of Russia.'[4]

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Kitchener asked Churchill for his opinion, making the point that 'we have no troops to land anywhere' and enquiring whether a naval 'demonstration' at the Dardanelles might be the most effective way of preventing more Turkish troops being sent east.[5]

A summary of Churchill's position is now in order. Since the outbreak of war he had attempted to use the navy to affect the land war. All his schemes had come to nothing, often for the very good reason that they were impracticable, or risked the ships that maintained Britain's naval supremacy or both. Yet the impulse to find an alternative theatre of operations had become more urgent since it had become clear that action on the Western Front was likely to be protracted and bloody. At this moment Hankey and Fisher's fulminations about Turkey had arrived. Churchill knew that Fisher's grandiose plan for several armies to be deployed against the Turks was wildly impracticable (had not Kitchener stated that there were no troops to land anywhere?). But Fisher had mentioned using some ships that he himself had described as useless to force the Dardanelles. And Kitchener had also drawn attention to the Dardanelles as the one place where Britain might usefully take action to ease the pressure on the Russians in the Caucasus. As Churchill was certainly not averse to action against the Turks—the escape of two German ships to Turkey in the face of superior British naval forces had proved an early humiliation—and it seems certain that Hankey, Fisher and Kitchener had persuaded him that something might be done in that region. As a result then of all these influences he called a meeting of the Admiralty War Group for 3 January to discuss possible operations against Turkey.

This group consisted of Admirals Fisher, (First Sea Lord, Jackson, (Special adviser on naval strategy), Oliver (Chief of the Naval Staff), Wilson (a former First Sea Lord employed in a consultative capacity), Captain de Bartoleme (Churchill's Naval Secretary) and Churchill himself. We do not know what transpired at that meeting—no minutes were kept. But as a result of it a telegram sent was by Churchill to Admiral Carden, commanding the squadron off the Dardanelles. It said:

> Do you consider the forcing of the Dardanelles by ships alone a practicable operation.
>
> It is assumed older Battleships fitted with minebumpers would be used preceded by Colliers or other merchant craft as bumpers and sweepers.
>
> Importance of results would justify severe losses
>
> Let me know your views.[6]

There are a number of interesting facets to this message. First, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it was framed to encourage a positive response for if severe losses were

justified what commander would admit that the operation should not be attempted? Why Churchill wrote in this vein is not difficult to divine. So far all his admirals had opposed all his schemes—he was not going to give such a relatively lowly commander as Carden the luxury of refusal. Second, the operation specified by Churchill was neither a demonstration mentioned by Kitchener nor a large combined operation as suggested by Hankey and Fisher and Lloyd George. What Churchill had done was to emphasise that aspect of Fisher's plan, which did not involve the use of non-existent armies and did not risk vital units of the Royal Navy. It therefore met Kitchener's objections that there were no troops to land and the admiral's objections to all his other schemes. What perhaps the admirals did not notice (anyway on 3 January) was that the operation ran counter to long standing naval orthodoxy which stated that ships were at a fatal disadvantage when they attacked land fortifications.

On 8 January Carden's plan for forcing the Dardanelles arrived. In truth it was not so much a plan as a list of the order in which the Dardanelles defences would be attacked—starting with the outer forts and working towards the series of forts at the Narrows.

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Nevertheless, despite its operational banality, at last Churchill had a plan. He lost no time in placing it before the War Council which met on 13 January. He emphasised that the guns of the Fleet were more modern than those in the Turkish forts and outranged them. What the Fleet would do when it cleared the Narrows was left rather vague. All Churchill had to say on this aspect was that 'it would proceed up to Constantinople and destroy the 'Goeben'.

A long discussion followed Churchill's exposition. Lloyd George and Kitchener thought the plan worth trying, Kitchener making the additional point that 'we could leave off the bombardment if it did not prove effective.' As for the rest of the War Council, there was no dissenting voice to be found. Most members had been born between 1850 and 1876. Their formative years had therefore been spent when British imperialism and its main instrument, the Royal Navy, was at its height. If in their eyes there seemed little that sea power could not accomplish, it should be no matter for wonder. Moreover, as no naval voice had yet spoken a word against the Dardanelles operation, they had no peg on which to hang opposition to the project, even had it existed.

In any case, no one had yet agreed to anything large. A group of old battleships was to attempt to blast their way through the Dardanelles to Constantinople. If operations in the Straits prospered, well and good: if they did not all seemed to agree that the ships could sail away. This might make a slight dent in British prestige but the ships were definitely in the second or third-eleven categories and this could always be emphasised as could the probing nature of the attack.

The conclusion of the War Council therefore was unanimous:

> 'That the Admiralty should also prepare for a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli Peninsula, with Constantinople as its objective.'

Churchill immediately ordered his admirals to give effect to Carden's requests. Other plans might still be discussed but from 13 January on there was no doubt that a naval offensive at the Dardanelles would go ahead.

Not for the first time during the First World War a strategic concept had come unstuck because the tactics required for its successful implementation were beyond the abilities of the force employed.

During the next few weeks a force of a dozen or so old battleships (including some provided by France) and two new ones (Queen Elizabeth and Irresistible) were gathered off the entrance to the Dardanelles. After an action that lasted from 19 February to 18 March, the naval attack was broken off. It was a complete failure. Not for the first time during the First World War a strategic concept had come unstuck because the tactics required for its successful implementation were beyond the abilities of the force employed. The idea was that the ships would destroy the Turkish forces by bombarding them at a range outside the guns of the forts. It was soon found that from these ranges the chances of hitting the guns of the forts were negligible. Any attempt to close the range was hampered by the minefields laid in the Dardanelles before the war and enhanced while the hostile bombardment was underway. Similarly attempts to sweep the minefields were hampered by the batteries of howitzers placed to protect them. When these batteries were attacked by the fleet it was found that the shallow trajectory of the ships' guns meant that most of the Turkish guns sheltered behind hills or in low lying ground were safe from naval fire. In short, the Turks had built an integrated defence not one section of which could be cracked by a purely naval force. There is a strong suspicion that the section of the Admiralty orders to Carden which emphasized the lowering effect on Turkish morale that the fall of some of the forts would have was the key to British thinking. In other words hopes of victory lay in the conviction that Turkish morale would crumble in the face of British sea power. When it did not the game was up.

In any case while the naval preparations were going forward a group of men inside and outside the Admiralty were having doubts about the efficacy of a naval only attack. Captain Richmond, once so gung-ho for the naval attack and one of the intellectual powerhouses in the Admiralty had changed his mind. He was soon writing to the Director of the Operations Division at the Admiralty, Admiral Leveson, 'urging the Greeks to assist at once in the Dardanelles operations with an army, which they should land on the northern side of the Gallipoli peninsular [while] our fleet is occupying the forts on the Dardanelles side'[7]

Admiral Jackson was also having doubts. He thought that the forts at the entrance to the Dardanelles might be overcome but was much more doubtful about operations inside the Straits. He wrote:

> The provision of the necessary military forces to enable the fruits of this heavy undertaking to be gathered must never be lost sight of ... To complete the destruction [of the forts at the Narrows], strong military landing parties with strong covering forces will be necessary. It is considered, however, that the full advantage of the undertaking would only be obtained by the occupation of the Peninsula by a military force acting in conjunction with the naval operations, as the pressure of a strong field army of the enemy on the Peninsula would not only greatly harass the operations, but would render the passage of the Straits impracticable by any but powerfully-armed vessels, even though all the permanent defences had been silenced.

> The naval bombardment is not recommended as a sound military operation, unless a strong military force is ready to assist in the operation, or, at least, follow it up immediately the forts are silenced.[8]

Meanwhile, Hankey had been working on members of the War Council to send troops to the Dardanelles. The day after the decision to send a division to Salonika he told Balfour that 'from Lord Fisher downwards every naval officer in the Admiralty who is in the secret believes that the Navy cannot take the Dardanelles without troops'.[9] He added that he had informed Asquith that Churchill's opinion that a 'ships alone' operation might still succeed was not to be trusted. Asquith was much influenced by Hankey and agreed that a 'fairly strong military force' should be assembled to assist the fleet.[10]

Above all Fisher had undergone a change of heart. He informed Churchill:

> Not a grain of wheat will come from the Black Sea unless there is military occupation of the Dardanelles! And it will be the wonder of the ages that no troops were sent to cooperate with the Fleet with half a million ... soldiers in England!'[11]

Eventually, this pressure of opinion had an effect on Churchill. An enthusiast for the naval only attack in mid-January, by mid-February he was not only arguing that troops should be sent but that at least one division should consist of regular soldiers (the 29 Division). At a War Council Meeting he told Kitchener who (understandably) was having trouble grasping why the navy suddenly required the presence of troops):

> It would be a great disappointment to the Admiralty if the 29th Division was not sent out. The attack on the Dardanelles was a very heavy naval undertaking. It was difficult to overrate the military advantages which success would bring ... In his opinion, it would be a thrifty disposition on our part to have 50,000 men in this region ... He was sending out ten trained battalions of the Naval Division. Neither these, however, nor the Australians and New Zealanders could be called first-rate troops at present, and they required a stiffening of regulars ... We should never forgive ourselves if this promising operation failed owing to insufficient military force at the critical moment.[12]

Kitchener decreed that there would be a combined operation and such was the consensus that the War Council was not summoned to discuss its merits.

Although on this occasion Kitchener resisted Churchill's call for troops, gradually momentum for their employment at Gallipoli increased. Therefore when the naval attack finally collapsed in ignominious defeat on 18 March, there was virtually no discussion. Kitchener decreed that there would be a combined operation and such was the consensus that the War Council was not summoned to discuss its merits.

Discussion by strategists on this decision has tended to focus on the foolishness of the naval only operation and the fact that a sensible combined attack was the best way forward, even if it was decided on late in the day after the Turks had received plenty of warning that it was to occur. This is wrong-headed. The combined operation was in fact no more sensible than the naval attack and a lot more dangerous. Britain could only raise about 75,000 troops to land in the first phase of an attack on Gallipoli.

Yet the Turks had an army of no less than 500,000 men. It is true that Turkey was hardly a first-rate power. But the Turkish army was equipped with sufficient of those two great killers of infantry—machine guns and artillery which were the determinants of victory in all the battles of the First World War. And on the Gallipoli peninsula the Turks would have the advantage of occupying all the high ground—around Achi Baba in the south, along the Sari Bair Ridge in the north and (should the Allies get so far) the Khilid Bahr Plateau which guarded the approaches to the narrows forts. In short what was likely to happen was that the smaller Allied force would fight the Turkish Army in relays because it would be much faster for the Turks to rotate their forces in and out of the battle area than could a force with bases far from the theatre of war. Such a scenario (which was not so different from what actually happened at Gallipoli) was fraught with danger but there is no evidence that anyone on the British side considered it. Instead the Prime Minister stated that he could not believe that Britain and France could not defeat Turkey—apparently not noticing that only a tiny fraction of British and French forces would ever engage the Turks. Others such as Kitchener clearly thought the arrival of British forces on the Peninsula would cause the Turks to surrender or bring about a revolution in Constantinople, the same logic that had been applied to the naval attack.

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Moreover, in one respect the combined operation was a much worse scenario for the Allies than the naval attack. After a naval defeat (as everyone said at the time) the ships could always sail away. Once there were 'boots on the ground' it would be more difficult to withdraw if things went awry. There would be calls for additional forces for that one final push that would decide the campaign and cries of lost prestige if the operation was not seen through to a successful conclusion. What we have then is not a sensible plan ranged against a nonsensical plan but two plans which lacked any sense—but one with a limited liability and one without.

And one final fact must be noted. Both plans were based on the assumption that the defeat of Turkey would somehow have a cosmic influence on the war as a whole. This was far from the case. The defeat of Turkey would have meant the defeat of Turkey. The great engine of the war was the German army and its position in France and Flanders would be hardly imperilled by what happened far away in south-eastern Europe. Turkey was not a prop for Germany as ran the facile analysis—Germany was the prop for all the other countries which made up the central powers. Until the German army in the west was beaten the war would continue. In the First World War there was no way around. Strategists would have been better employed in devoting their attention to the tactics that would allow victory to be achieved on the only front that mattered—the Western Front.

Endnotes

1 Lloyd George Memorandum 31/12/14, Churchill Companion Volume Documents, Vol. 3 (hereafter known as *CV3*), London, Heinemann, 1971, p. 350–356.

2 Lieutenant-Colonel Hankey: Memorandum 28/12/14, *CV3*, p. 337–343.

3 Ibid.

4 Sir George Buchanan to Grey 1/1/15 in Ibid, p. 359–60.

5 Kitchener sent two letters to Churchill on 2/1/15 to this effect. They are in Ibid, p. 360 and p. 360–1.

6 Churchill to Admiral Carden 3/1/15, *CV3*, p. 367.

7 Richmond to lovesome 3/2/15, Richmond Papers, RIC 1/12.

8 Sir Henry Jackson, ATTACK ON CONSTANTINOPLE 13/1/15, *CV3*, p. 506–512.

9 Hankey to Balfour quoted in Ibid, p. 500.

10 Asquith to Venetia Stanley 13/2/15 in Ibid, p. 512–13.

11 Fisher to Churchill 29/1/15, *CV3*, p. 471.

12 Ibid.

About the Author

Robin Prior was born in Kapunda, South Australia and was educated at the University of Adelaide where he took his PhD and held a visiting fellowship in the Department of History. He is presently Head of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales at the Defence Force Academy, Canberra. His publications include *Churchill's 'Word Crisis' as History*, and with Trevor Wilson *The Somme; Command on the Western Front*; and *Passchendaele: the Untold Story*. He was also editor of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*. He has been a visiting Fellow at King's College, London and at the History Program, Australian National University, Canberra. He is a frequent contributor to the press.

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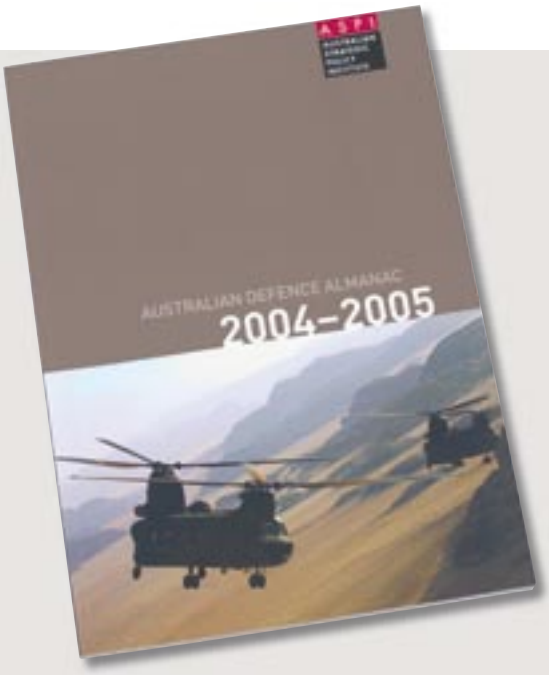

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