

WHY TANKS? WHY ABRAMS?

The application of argument mapping to a
contentious public policy debate

FINDINGS, SELECTED MAPS AND OBSERVATIONS



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THE COMPLETE REPORT

The complete report is nine times the length of this brief paper. It provides:

- a more detailed introduction to the methods used in the inquiry;
- a deeper historical background to the debate about heavy armour in Australia;
- a summation of the Canadian debate about tanks;
- an analysis of the Vietnam War combat study, which is so widely cited in support of the tanks decision;
- a detailed introduction to the assumptions in the 2000 White Paper which have led to ambiguity and consequent confusion about the role of tanks in the Australian Army;
- Map-based analysis of the full case, including all the objections; and
- a series of intermediate exercises which show how the “macro” of the case—the key point of reference in the report—was developed.

The complete report can be downloaded from the Austhink website—www.austhink.com/consulting_home – and a hard copy is available from Austhink for \$100 plus postage.

Why bother doing all this, given that the decision has been taken already?

THE PROBLEM: WHY THIS INQUIRY WAS NEEDED

Ideally, when a significant public policy decision is announced, the grounds for it will be sufficiently clear that **any interested party will quickly be able to grasp the case** that has been made. Indeed, if the case can be made clear well before the decision has been taken, constructive debate is possible; errors or oversights can more easily be identified than otherwise and, having been identified, can more readily be corrected. Where a decision has been openly subjected to this kind of review, everyone can be more confident that the case is sound and a broad consensus can form in support of it.

Notoriously, **this does not generally happen**. Decisions are taken for reasons that are often not made explicit, are not thought through carefully or are known to be questionable and are for that reason camouflaged in rhetoric or protected by the classification of position papers and sources of information. As a consequence, debate on such matters is either insufficient or ineffective; errors or oversights are prone to occur and be discovered only after the fact, at which point there is a tendency to go into ‘damage control’ and try to cover them up or rationalise them away; and consensus is much harder to build, because both **confusion and mistrust** bedevil efforts to do this on the basis of poorly thought through decisions.

Few thoughtful observers of the public scene will question these observations. By common agreement, the decision-making with regard to

the war in Iraq, for example, has been plagued by these problems at the highest levels of the most democratic countries in the world. Yet the Iraq war is only a more dramatic example of what happens all the time, with **a corrosive effect on the confidence of citizens in the effectiveness and even the probity of our decision-making machinery**. Confusion, frustration and cynicism abound and, ironically, they often lead to public scepticism about decisions that were, in fact, quite sound—because, in general, there is mistrust of how decisions are made and because, in particular, the grounds for even sound decisions are often unclear.

This was the case with the **decision to replace the aging fleet of Leopard 1 tanks in the Australian Army with refurbished Abrams M1A1 AIM tanks**, taken in 2003 and announced in March 2004. The decision was announced and a number of considerations provided for it, but no systematic account was provided as to the case for and against the decision and how the decision was arrived at. Questions began to be asked at once and the debate went unresolved over the following three years. **Those who had always been opposed to the tank capability being maintained were unreconciled to the decision and continued to criticise it**, or even ridicule it publicly. This led to various press reports which contributed to widespread public misunderstanding of the decision.

In consequence, **a public perception developed that the tanks decision had, in fact, clearly been a bad one**. Launching Paul Dibb’s *Essays on Australian Defence* at the Australian National University, on 10 July 2006, former Secretary of the Department of Defence Allan Hawke commented that what he called the “ridiculous decision on Abrams tanks” had had “disastrous repercussive effects.” A cover story in *The Bulletin* on October 3 2006, featured a picture of the Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson, standing next to an Abrams tank, with a caption reading ‘DUD’S ARMY: How we are spending \$100bn building the wrong defence force.’ Drawing extensively on remarks by former Deputy Secretary for Strategy, Hugh White, this article presented a systematically confused and misleading account of the case for the tanks decision. Such a view of the matter seems, also, to have been behind the assertion by former Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Michael Costello’s dismissal of the decision as “ludicrous” in *The Australian*, on 16 February 2007.

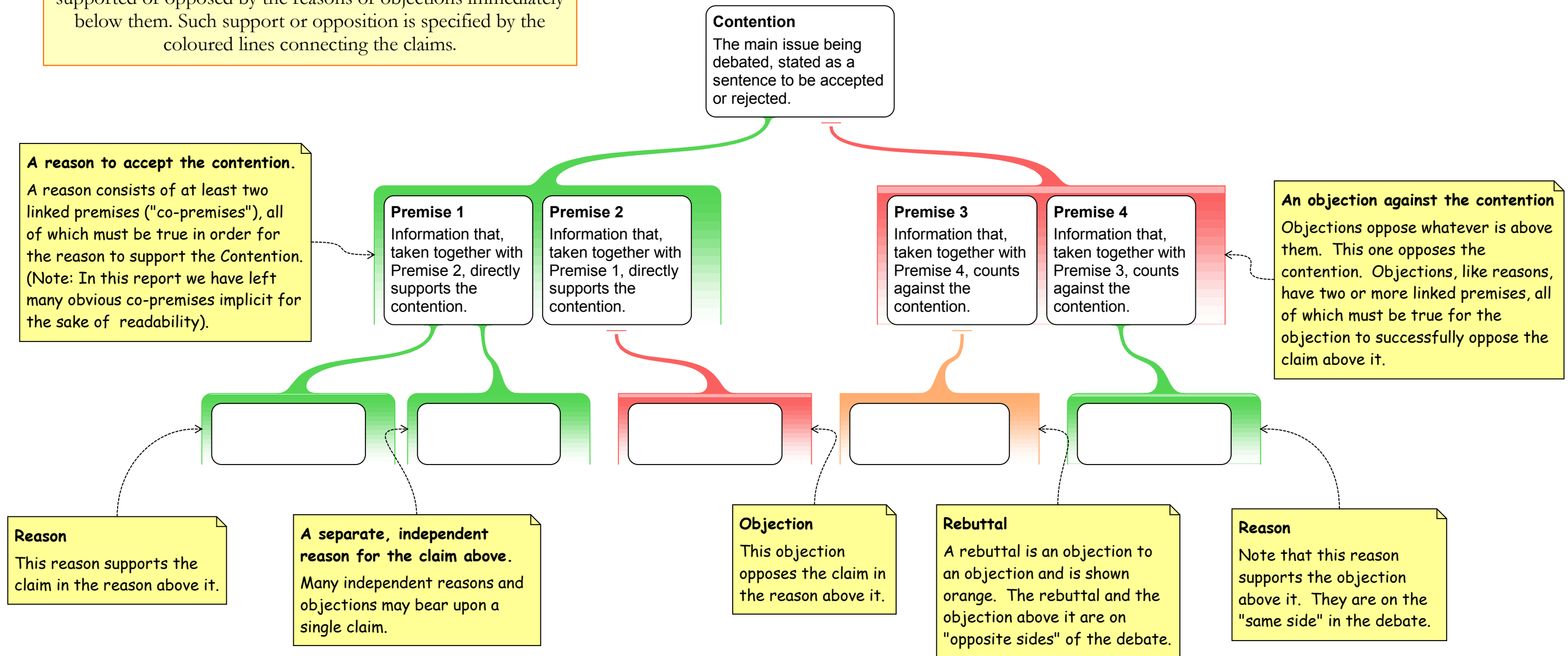
Claims as sweeping as this by such formerly senior and supposedly well informed individuals called for a response, not in rhetorical kind but in the form of **a systematic account of the case** which would show any reasonable observer what the grounds were for the decision, where the objections arose from and why those objections are unsound. This inquiry was commissioned and conceived to fill that need.

The conventions of argument mapping—utilizing space, line and colour—are designed to be intuitively easy for the visual brain to follow and to relieve it of the considerable burden of having to extract the reasoning going on in a piece of prose and think about the soundness of that reasoning at the same time.

How to read an argument map

An argument map consists of a set of claims (contentions or premises), hierarchically organized to display their logical relationships. Those relationships follow a simple rule: claims are supported or opposed by the reasons or objections immediately below them. Such support or opposition is specified by the coloured lines connecting the claims.

Figure 1. The Method: Conventions of Argument Mapping



THE FINDINGS

Finding 1. The decision to buy new (fully refurbished and upgraded) Abrams M1A1 AIM tanks for the Army was sound. It was sound because the old Leopard 1 tanks, that had been in service since the late 1970s, being worn out and obsolete, needed to be replaced, if the tank capability was to be maintained; and that capability *did* need to be maintained. In maintaining the capability, the decision to buy the Abrams M1A1 AIM was sound, because no other tank would better meet the combat needs of the Army and the actual deal offered by the Americans for it was far better than was available for either of the other two candidates—the Leopard 2 and the Challenger 2.

Finding 2. There was one central reason why the tank capability, needed to be maintained, although there were many considerations involved. That reason was that having the tank capability will, in the judgment of the specialists, be a necessary part of the Army's capacity to ensure that it has the combat weight, across the full spectrum of its future missions, to achieve those missions without undue risk. That it should be able to do this is the prescription of the 2000 White Paper and is, in itself, uncontroversial. That the tank will be necessary to that end is what has been disputed.

Finding 3. The tank is necessary to ensure the Army has the combat weight to achieve its missions without undue risk, because across the full spectrum of its foreseeable future missions—humanitarian, stabilisation or peace-keeping, counter-insurgency or conventional war—there is now a clear risk that benign situations can turn, suddenly and unpredictably, into open conflict, which would force upon our land forces the necessity to engage in close combat in complex (very often urban) terrain. Prevailing in close combat under these conditions is difficult and can be very costly in casualties without the availability of the mobile force

protection and highly discriminating direct fire support that tanks provide.

Finding 4. The public case made for buying the new tanks gave undue prominence to the claim that a study of combat operations in Vietnam had demonstrated that tanks there saved Australian lives by a factor of six. The study did not show this. It did, however, make a credible case that tanks conferred decisive advantage on Australian forces in attacks on heavily fortified enemy bunkers. In particular, it showed that they substantially improved the success rate of such attacks. That this much touted study has been misunderstood so widely is notable and a cautionary lesson for capability analysis more generally.

Finding 5. The most systematic case for tanks is actually embedded in Army studies that have not received wide circulation. The key document is *Adaptive Campaigning*, published in November 2006, which builds on a decade of experimentation and learning. The 1997-98 Restructuring the Army Trials; combat simulations done by the Defence Science and Technology Organization (DSTO); and the sustained examination by the Army of complex war fighting all underpinned the judgment that across the full spectrum of future missions, the tank will provide an irreplaceable capacity for small combined arms teams to prevail in close combat in what are generally called “lower-intensity operations”. This is where the decision intersects with the precepts of the 2000 White Paper, as the Chief of Army was fully aware when he briefed the press on the subject in August 2004.

Finding 6. Many objections have been advanced against the decision to maintain the tank capability. When closely examined, they come down to five fundamental ones; but none of these is as strong as

it seems at first glance. The five objections and our finding in regard to them are as follows:

Objection 1: The opportunity cost of buying (expensive Abrams) tanks was too high.

Rebuttal: The cost is modest, was thought through carefully and opted for ahead of a more expensive upgrade to the ground-based air defence system.

Objection 2: We could never use the Abrams tanks, because they are too heavy to deploy and are unsuited to the soft terrain of our region.

Rebuttal: The Abrams tanks can certainly be used in the region, just as Matilda and Centurion tanks have been in the past. Ground pressure, not weight is the key, and the ground pressure of the Abrams is far lower than that of the wheeled vehicles we routinely deploy.

Objection 3: Tanks, in general, are now an obsolete weapons platform, built for the Cold War, but unsuited to the 21st century battlefield.

Rebuttal: Tanks are not obsolete, but remain a potent and important part of combined arms teams in contemporary warfare.

Objection 4: We would never choose to use tanks.

Rebuttal: We would not lightly use tanks, but have in the past and would again at need. We were prepared to do so in East Timor in 1999, had circumstances become more serious.

Objection 5: Tanks will not be required in our immediate region and this is the only region in which we should deploy our land forces.

Rebuttal: There is now bipartisan consensus that our security interests are not confined to our immediate region. Whether we will need to use tanks in our immediate region is not a question to which a hard and fast answer can be provided, but it is one to which careful thought should be given in pondering the tank decision. This is probably the most sensitive and uncertain consideration in the case.

Finding 7. All these objections persist because the evidence can *seem* to support them and because the *assumptions* which shape the intuitive interpretation of that evidence are quite compelling, e.g. that being so heavy the tanks must be hard to deploy or use in soft terrain. Therefore, whenever the case for tanks is being made, some care should be taken to address these objections both clearly and concisely.

Finding 8. The **fifth objection** is of a different kind to the other four. It pertains not to the general case for buying Abrams tanks or to the nature of tanks themselves, but to the strategic policy guidance which, ostensibly, shapes our force structure development. This objection is based on Chapter 6, para 24 of the 2000 White Paper and it consists of two claims, working together: that our Army will not require tanks to achieve its missions *in our immediate region* and that it is *only* for missions within our immediate region that our Army should be structured and equipped.

Finding 9. This objection is actually a kind of **land mine beneath the case** made for tanks by the Army, since that case rests, to a large extent, on the utility of tanks in complex war fighting in a *general* sense,

without the case having been made as clearly as it perhaps might have been for their utility in our immediate region. If this fifth objection was to be sustained—and critics of the decision fairly clearly believe it is robust—then the case for tanks might be fatally undermined. The conclusion of this inquiry was that the utility of tanks in MOLE (Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment) was demonstrated in the past and is likely to be demonstrated again in the future, either by the use of tanks or the lack of them, in realistic contingencies. It should be underscored, however, that much hinges on this two-fold objection and that it needs to be addressed clearly and convincingly, if a common understanding of the need for tanks is to be lodged in the public (and policy-making) mind.

Finding 10. That said, the two-fold nature of the objection is something to which critics of the decision to buy the tanks themselves seem to pay insufficient attention. The objection, if it is to be sound, requires *both* that tanks lack utility in our immediate region *and* that our Army should *only* be structured and equipped for missions within this region. **If either of these premises is unfounded, the objection as a whole carries**

no weight. Just to the extent that MOLE is a serious doctrinal approach to future regional contingencies, the case for tanks would seem to be sound. Even if this was not so, however, provided it was clear that tanks were needed in close combat elsewhere, the fifth objection could be sustained if and only if it was accepted that the Army should not be structured or equipped for any missions outside our region. That has plainly not been the view of the National Security Committee of Cabinet under the Coalition government. As of early August 2007, it is no longer the official view of the Labor Party, either.

This is a much abbreviated version of a report, prepared for the Director General, Future Land Warfare, which made extensive use of **argument maps**, exploring the logical structure of the case less in detail. Fundamental to its purpose was that it facilitate the emergence of a “rational consensus” within the strategic policy and force structure community on this matter. A very simple argument map (Map 1, p. 4), sums up a minimalist and conservative version of such a consensus, based on the implications of the old 2000 White Paper. A fresh White Paper might be expected to make the case explicitly.

We need to step back from the details to see what the most general claims are, so that we can see where the details belong and where they matter.

THE MACRO: SEEING THE CASE CLEARLY

Fundamentally, evaluating the decision to replace the Leopard 1s with Abrams tanks entails judging whether or not this was a sound decision in all the circumstances. The problem is that most of those who get involved in the debate make a leap of logic from some salient consideration or other to the final judgment without actually exploring “all the circumstances”.

When asked, “Why tanks?”, for example, we found that **Army** officers were very likely to respond by saying, “Tanks save lives”. But how many lives? Under what circumstances? Compared with what other platforms? Asked why we should *not* buy new tanks, **critics** are likely to respond with a claim or assertion such as “You can’t use tanks in our region”, or “We don’t need to fight high intensity wars”, or “We only got Abrams because we wanted to fight big armoured battles alongside the Americans.”

There are, in fact, many considerations that have a place in the debate. Seeing precisely where they bear on how we might evaluate the judgment that buying the new Abrams tanks was the right decision is a non-trivial exercise. It begins, however, by seeing, that there is a natural **hierarchy of claims** and a specifiable place in that hierarchy for all objections; and that the complete set of these things must be seen clearly and evaluated properly, if we are to judge whether or not the decision was sound.

To establish what the hierarchy of claims is requires stepping back from the welter of detailed considerations to consider what, at the most general or abstract level, is actually being asserted. To identify what the objections are and at what specific places they impinge on the case also requires a certain amount of abstraction. In **Map 2**, opposite, we can see the results of both exercises. This is what we call a “**macro**” - **the top levels of an argument**—off which all other details hang. Once the macro is clear and agreed, the argument can be developed and evaluated carefully and systematically.

Claim **3A-b**, circled in red, is the **pivotal claim** in the case made for purchasing the new tanks. The ground beneath it are the most general form of the support for that claim. These claims, together with the more detailed considerations that underpin them, constitute the central line of argument for the decision. Note that all claims that are supporting the claim above them are coloured green and all those objecting to that above them are coloured red. This is one of the features of argument mapping, which makes it easy for the eye to quickly scan and comprehend what is going on in an argument.

Having laid out the macro, we are well placed to consider, one at a time and without losing sight of the big picture, the three structural features of the argument that the map makes clear: the **peripheral claims** (**2A-a**: that the

old tanks needed to be replaced if the capability was to be maintained; and **1A-b**: that the Abrams tanks were the best replacement available); the **objections** to the case at this fundamental level; and the **central line of argument** for the decision. While there may be disagreement about points of detail as we explore each of these structural features, the advantage of the map is that we have a common point of reference for where and why any such disagreement actually matters.

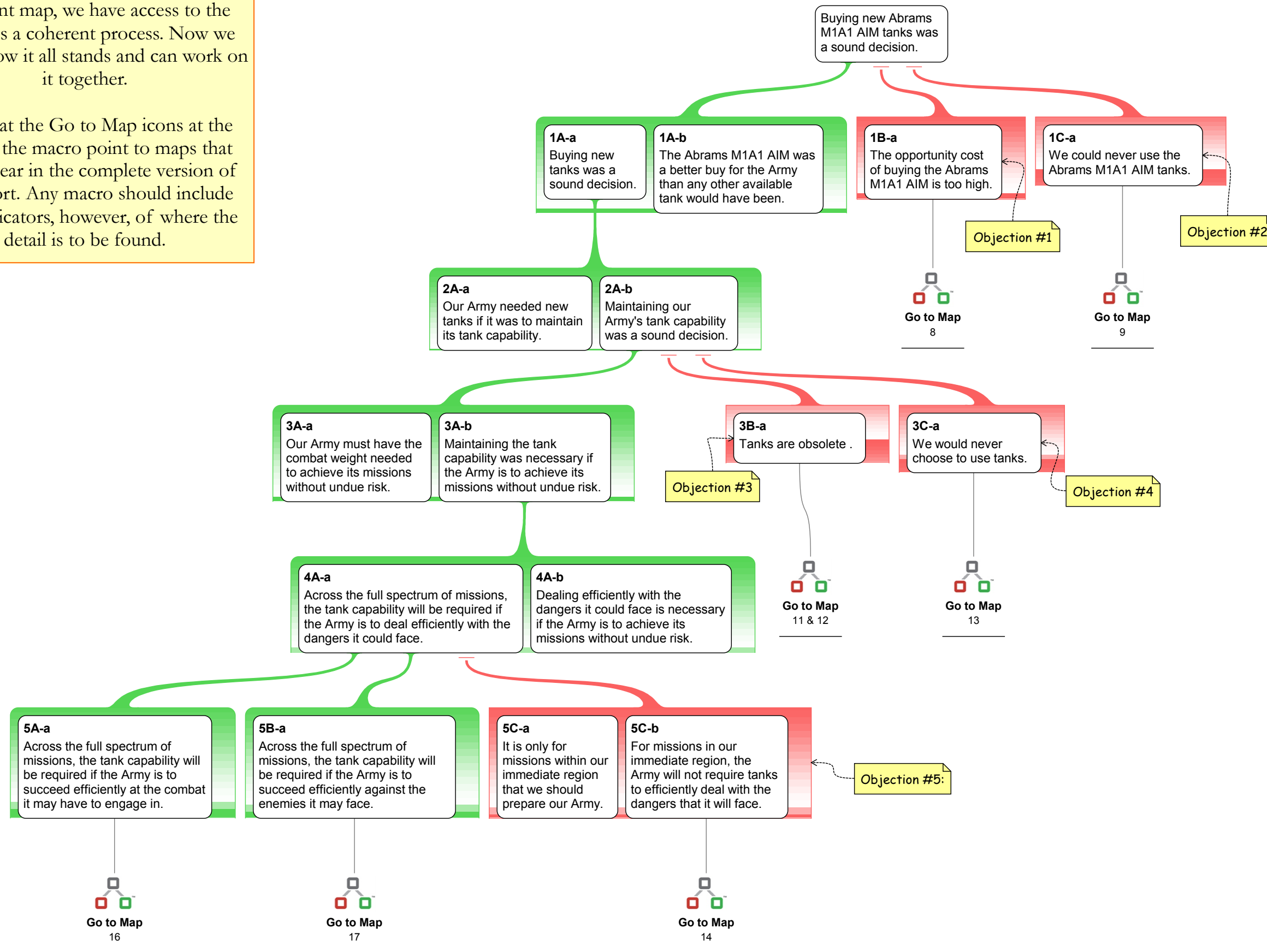
The peripheral claims must both be true for the case to stand up. As it happens, they are not, in themselves, seriously in dispute. The old Leopards were both worn out and obsolete. The Abrams M1A1 tanks, a fully refurbished version of the state of the art U.S. main battle tank, are as good as any tank in the world. The decisive consideration in their purchase, however, was their availability and excellent price compared with the other tanks on the market.

In this abbreviated version of the report, we concentrate on addressing the objections and then laying out the central line of argument. At a minimum, this should enable any reader to form a clear view of what the important considerations in the case actually are and to form a rational judgment about the case as a whole—a judgment that will be readily open to refinement or correction because it will be based on a clear understanding of evidence and reasoning.

Map 1: The 'Macro' - Seeing the Debate

When we assemble the pieces in an argument map, we have access to the debate as a coherent process. Now we can see how it all stands and can work on it together.

Note that the Go to Map icons at the base of the macro point to maps that only appear in the complete version of the report. Any macro should include such indicators, however, of where the detail is to be found.



OBJECTION #5: THE ‘6:24 PROBLEM’

The fifth objection is grounded in a particular, quite common and intuitively plausible interpretation of a key passage in the 2000 White Paper. There are two components to the objection. Both must be true if the objection is to be sustained. It is not clear that either is true, but there is genuine uncertainty on both counts and scope for further careful thought.

This objection has been included here as an illustration of how the method is used to systematically lay out and evaluate the case.

We have seen that the case for tanks, far from being at odds with the 2000 White Paper, is anchored to its key premises. There remains, however, a final hurdle for the case and it is the phrasing used in the White Paper, Chapter 6, Para 24 (6:24):

*“Our land forces would be ideally suited to provide contributions to lower intensity operations including peace-enforcement, peacekeeping and many types of humanitarian operations. Such operations are much more likely than high intensity operations and would emphasize mobility and the levels of protection and firepower **appropriate for our own environment**, rather than the kinds of heavy armoured capabilities needed for high intensity continental warfare.”*

The words in bold print here are seen as a sticking point by critics, who maintain that **we do not need tanks in our immediate region**. We have seen that the common objections that we could not use tanks in the region, or that we could not or would not deploy them are unsound. But it might still be objected that the necessity would not arise, because in the region around us we would not face the

kinds of hostile force or robust defensive structures that would call for tanks rather than light infantry and light armour. This consideration impinges directly on the grounds underpinning the pivotal claim in the case and that is why it has been so prominent in public and policy debates on the subject.

As can be seen in **Map 8**, however, there are reasons to believe that close combat and with it the possible requirement for tanks, is conceivable within our immediate region. **Army planning, based on the concept of MOLE** (Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment) calls for tanks to be available in future contingencies. We almost needed tanks in East Timor, in 1999, under relatively benign circumstances and it is, therefore, perfectly conceivable that we may need them under comparable circumstances in future. Indeed, the very conditions which are making asymmetric war and rising **operational uncertainty** more rife around the world have been **emerging in our own region** in recent years, most notably across South East Asia, so that we cannot be confident we will not have to

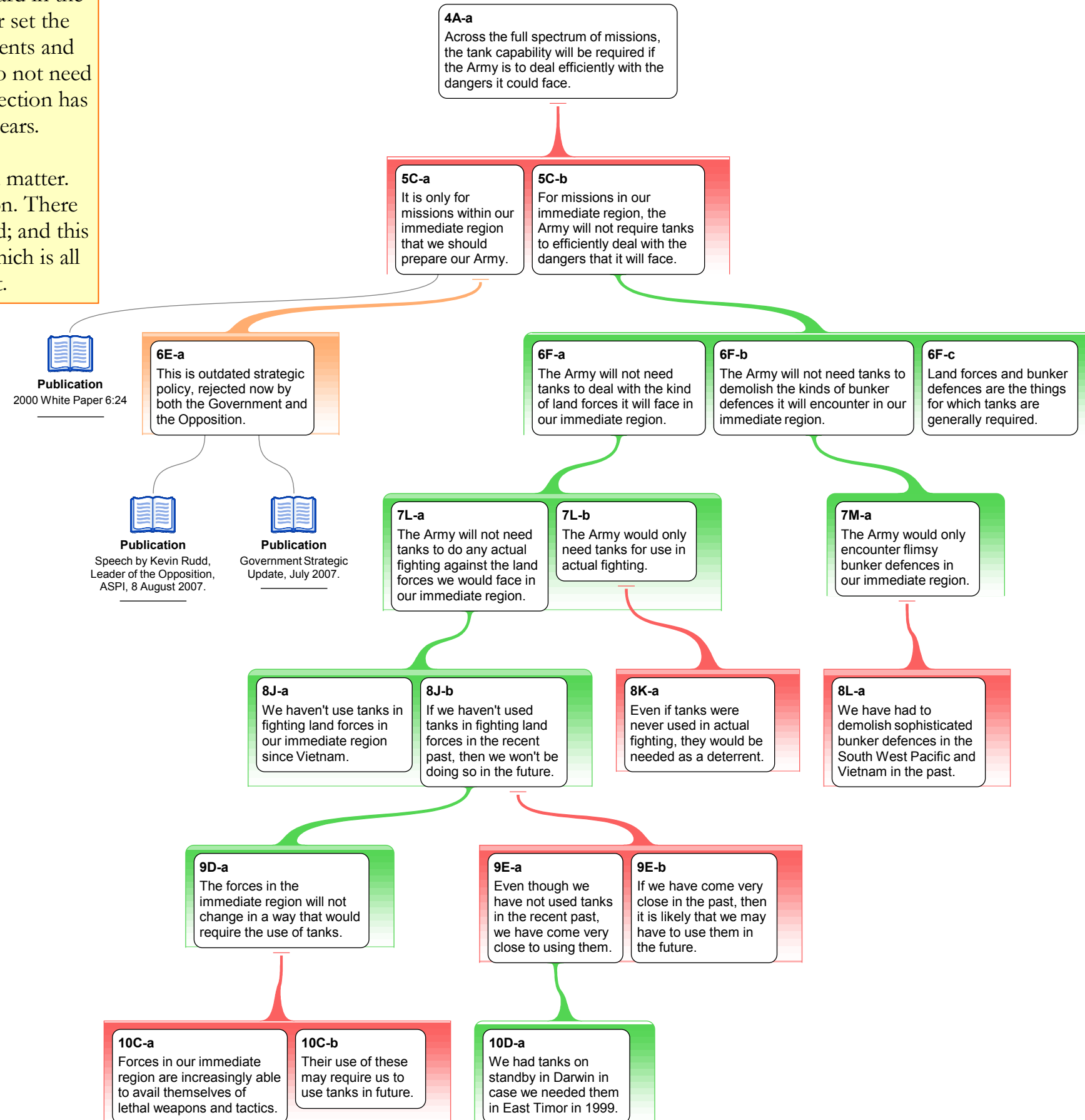
deal with them in the next decade.

Critics of the decision to maintain the tank capability have often given the impression that they believe the 6:24 problem is a decisive objection to the decision and that it shows the Army has a fixation on anachronistic weapons suited only to large wars outside our immediate region, which we are not expected to have to fight using land forces. If they are to uphold this claim, however, they have to demonstrate that Army planning did not consider **plausible contingencies** in our immediate region and that tanks will not be required in such contingencies in the foreseeable future. They cannot show this, because Army planning for MOLE and the clear precedent of tanks being used in our immediate region make maintaining the capability reasonable, even if it is only a hedge against the possibility of close combat in future operations. Moreover, our **strategic policy** allows that that possibility cannot now be excluded across the spectrum of missions on which the Army will be sent, whether in our immediate region or in the further reaches of the world.

Map 2: The '6:24 problem'

Objection #5 is widely seen as the trump card in the hands of the critics: the 2000 White Paper set the boundaries around our strategic commitments and interests and, within those boundaries, we do not need tanks. However, the key premise of this objection has become weaker and weaker in recent years.

The minor premise is a more complicated matter. Plainly, we may not need tanks in our region. There are, however, some indications that we could; and this justifies maintaining a modest capability, which is all that the 59 Abrams tanks represent.



CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

We have stepped through a complex and contentious debate. We have seen that the **complexity itself is what has generated much of the contention**. We have seen that by structuring the debate in a hierarchical manner, we can discern what is actually going on within the complex and shifting mass of contending considerations. Having done that, we have been able literally to see nine things:

- What the core claims in the case are,
- Where they sit in relation to one another
- What the basic objections are
- Where they impinge on the case
- What their weaknesses are
- How claims and objections balance up
- Which claims are most important;
- Where the greatest sensitivities are

All this enables us to understand the debate better, to see why it has been so difficult to generate rational consensus on the case and to pinpoint exactly where new evidence or a reconsideration of this judgment or that might alter the balance of the case and, just possibly, compel a different overall judgment.

Those who were or are strongly opposed to the decision to buy the Abrams tanks ought very easily be able, on the basis of this report, to do either of two things—change their minds, because they now see the case differently; or **specify exactly where** they believe the report misses key evidence that would make such a significant difference to the case that it would lead to a revision of

the judgment that the case for tanks is sound.

It should now be clear where such key evidence would impinge on the case. It would almost certainly consist of evidence that the specific opportunity cost of the tanks decision was far higher than it seems; or that the difficulties in actually deploying the Abrams tanks will be insuperable; that new weapons platforms really have made, or very soon will make tanks obsolete in the battlefields of the coming decade or two; or that there are, indeed, compelling reasons to believe that no Australian government would ever use Abrams tanks in the region around us and that the call for them further afield would be marginal at best. But these have been the standard, basic objections to the case and it is difficult to see new evidence arising in the immediate future that would alter the key judgments made in this report.

The single greatest area of sensitivity is what, in this report, has been dubbed “the 6:24 problem”. While critics too often appear to overlook both the specific claims made by the Chief of Army regarding the reasons for maintaining the tank capability and the history of Australian use of tanks in the island littoral and Vietnam since 1943, there is still a need for the role of tanks in future MOLE missions to be more clearly spelled out. Unless it becomes politically and publicly understood that tanks have a key role to play in realistically conceivable MOLE missions over the next two decades, critics will continue to snipe at the decision

to buy Abrams tanks. This would have been all the more so had the 2000 White Paper remained the genuine basis of strategic policy. It now seems certain that a bipartisan agreement has been reached to replace that document with a revised strategic policy. That revised policy includes the development of a significant expeditionary capability. In such a policy context, the case for tanks is certainly stronger than it was before.

Three kinds of judgment enter into the picture in the policy debate. The first has to do with war fighting doctrine; the second with estimates of probability and contingency planning; the third with strategic policy itself. The **first** judgment has to do with whether mobile, highly protected direct fire support platforms (which everyone has called “tanks” since 1916) are needed in expeditionary operations, including MOLE. The **second** has to do with how likely it is that operations requiring the actual use of tanks will occur in the next decade or two. The **third** judgment has to do with the inclination of Australian governments to undertake such operations, when all their implications are weighed up. For some time now, it has been clear that Coalition governments are, by disposition, more inclined than Labor governments to contemplate such operations and some of the most influential voices in the strategic policy and force structure debate of the past generation have been and remain deeply sceptical about the use of the Australian Army overseas in any role other than a “constabulary” one.

The experiences of the East Timor operation, since 1999, and the more recent RAMSI mission in the Solomons have done something to reconcile the sceptics to the need for a better equipped and more deployable Army. They appear to have done little, if anything, however, to reconcile them to the idea that the Army needs tanks for such missions. This is the 6:24 problem as it impacts on practical reality. The fact that the aging Leopard tanks were held on a leash in 1999, in Darwin, in case things got out of hand in East Timor, is a strong indicator of **how finely balanced the matter is** in this regard.

What it comes down to is the question: Do we want an Army which, in the unpleasant event that close combat becomes necessary on a mission of any kind, has the capacity to achieve that mission without undue risk—that is, to prevail in such close combat reliably, without incurring heavy casualties and while remaining proportionate and discriminating in its use of firepower? If we do, then military doctrine suggests we are well-advised to have a few tanks. **If, conversely,** we were to make the judgment either that such a contingency is so remote as to render the risk negligible; or that, in such a contingency, we would be prepared to take casualties and run the risk of failure; or, finally, that when confronted with determined enemies on land ready to fight, we should simply shoulder arms and

withdraw from the scene, **then we might conclude** that tanks are not required by the Army.

However, few responsible policy makers think like this with regard to major categories of risk. If we took a strictly comparable approach to our air and naval power, we would not have or insist on maintaining a first rate air combat capability or world class conventional submarines. If we took a strictly comparable approach to our personal affairs, few of us would take out life, car accident or income insurance. We do so, however, because it is prudent to do so; just in case. If one does have such insurance, it may never be necessary to call on it. Indeed, we hope that it will not. If, on the other hand, one does not have it and a crisis occurs, the consequences can be very serious indeed.

The Australian Army is very small and its tank capability, even with the powerful Abrams M1A1 tanks in its inventory, will still be very modest. The role of those tanks has been spelled out very plainly by the Chief of Army. It is to work in close co-ordination with small combined arms teams, in an infantry support role, to carry out joint land combat. It is *not* intended as some kind of **overweening capability for sweeping, continental-scale heavy armoured warfare.** This has never been the way in which Australian forces have used tanks,

although they have benefited from tanks being used in this manner by more powerful allies on the Western front in World War I; in the North African and Western European fronts during World War II; and in the Korean War. The Australian tank is now and has traditionally been a vital support to infantry when the going gets tough. Whether in MOLE operations or in complex war fighting outside our immediate region, that is its anticipated role throughout the service lives of the newly purchased Abrams M1A1 tanks.

It is the nature of decisions such as that to buy the new tanks that they do not lend themselves to straight-forward proof once and for all, in black and white terms. There is, in all complex practical judgments of this kind, **an irreducible margin of uncertainty.** What this report has done, therefore, is not to prove beyond any cavil that tanks are and will be vital to whatever missions the Australian Army is sent on for the next 20 years; but rather to enhance a common understanding of what the considerations are that bear upon this question and how they can be seen in a clearer perspective than is generally the case. **The report will have served its purpose just to the extent that it eases the bewilderment and frustration of those engaged on either side of the debate** and facilitates a deeper grasp of where they can most fruitfully focus their energies in resolving their differences of opinion.