

Australia's National Security

Briefing Paper

Defence doctrines, foreign affairs, and economic questions are closely inter-related policies for any government. Their fundamental purpose should be to ensure the sovereignty, security and economic and social well-being of a country and its people.

While defence of a state is necessary, the cost cannot be too high (economically, socially, demo-cratically, environmentally, etc.) or there is little or nothing left worth defending. There is a point past which military strength becomes a source of insecurity.

It is essential to examine the complex nature of security and the interconnections between its various dimensions.

Security is multi-dimensional and it is bad policy to analyse defence in isolation. It is time to assess the best way to balance and integrate our responses.

Security is often interpreted to mean military security -- the capacity to identify and meet perceived threats to a nation by military means, by the use or the threat of the use of force.

However, Australia's security can be enhanced by attention to social, political and humanitarian issues which affect the people of this country as well as in neighbouring states.

The over-emphasis in casting the military as Australia's guarantee of "security" has not engendered a true culture of national security.

Resources committed to developing the military have meant that less is available for constructive work such as preventive diplomacy and cultural exchange; Radio Australia and student exchange programs are just two examples.

Resources committed to military defence mean less money for developing strong social cohesion and stability within the nation through employment programs and the health, education and housing needs of Australians and our neighbours.

A feature of military expenditure is its "opportunity costs", that is, the opportunities which are foregone for alternative consumption and investment.

The World Bank says high military spending contributes to fiscal and debt crises, complicates stabili-sation and adjustment, and negatively affects economic growth and development.

Military expenditure reduces public and private investment, diverts funds and personnel from civilian research and development, and increases the current account deficit. It tends to retard the rate of economic growth.

Regional engagement

There is no readily identifiable threat to Australia of major direct attack. This has been so for decades and there is no evidence it will change in the foreseeable future.

The regional strategic environment is clearly complex and changing — the so called "arc of instability" — but this does not necessarily mean it is more dangerous for Australia. It could equally well be designated an "arc of opportunity".

Conflicts in the region are predominantly internal. They are not directed against Australia and they cannot be solved by military means.

Regional engagement requires that we rethink what we mean by security and develop different relationships with regional states.

Overseas aid can assist recipients to cope better with their conflict-inducing social and economic problems.

Overseas aid is a cost effective means of contributing to reducing the problems of people in our region, yet Australia's contribution is minute compared to defence spending.

Terrorism

An article entitled "Beyond the Fridge Magnet" (Sydney Morning Herald, 19/1/08) comments that the Federal Government's national security review "can help protect the majority from terrorist attack, while protecting minorities from unfair suspicion and harassment".

It continues: "Clearly, the "war on terrorism", as conceived and run since September 11, 2001, has not added to our sense of security, and may have added to the threat. The military response pursued by President George Bush, and encouraged by the previous prime ministers of Britain and Australia, has heightened the grievance of the Islamic world against the West and got us into a quagmire of sectarian and ethnic disputes."

It is clear that increased use of the military and police is not the only, and probably not the most effective way to solve the danger to Australia's security from acts of terrorism. A more fundamental approach is required.

There is clear evidence that terrorist violence is sometimes due to a struggle between those who have with those who do not have, or between those who are oppressed with those who are oppressors. Underlying problems which may be the genesis of terrorist acts include poverty, disparity and an overwhelming feeling of being powerless.

When people have a commitment to pursuing a grievance combined with the perception that there are few opportunities available to them to find justice, then terrorism becomes an option for pursuing that grievance.

The challenge is to confront the reasons for acts of terrorism and to develop policies to overcome or at least ameliorate them.

Interoperability

We cannot afford a continued cold war paradigm which defines regional engagement and defence of national security as interoperability with the United States in potential high intensity conflicts. This would require expanding strategic strike and force projection capabilities, maintaining a 'knowledge edge' over regional states and remaining a substantial maritime power.

Australia simply cannot afford such an approach economically, politically and socially.

A rational reassessment of our security priorities would lead to a number of conclusions which would contribute to an independent policy which would make a major contribution to Australia's security.

These could include such things as:

- using more defensive and less costly systems as opposed to the long-range, aggressive capabilities currently in use;
- developing a proper coastal protection system;
- committing Australia to possess enough military force to defend our territory but not to threaten the territory of other states;
- focussing on dual-use equipment (for example, aircraft which can be used for water bombing bushfires as well as for coastal surveillance and interception);
- investing time and effort in regional arms control through bodies such as ASEAN;
- working to develop transparency and confidence building in the region and to restrict a regional arms race;
- increasing the share of GDP allocated to overseas aid;
- contributing to the elimination of the foreign debt of developing nations;
- expanding trade and co-operation in the development of science and medicine, educational and cultural exchanges.

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