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Australia's Security Challenges: Lessons for Others?

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As nations navigate a challenging world, Australian Defence Force (ADF) experiences on operations overseas and in major natural disasters have produced lessons that can be adapted and exported to other security stakeholders.

EVERYDAY IT seems that we are reminded of how many different challenges there are to national security. Now, as Canberra begins to consider the successor policy document to its 2008 *National Security Statement*, it is timely to ask how nations such as Australia can ensure that all the organisations and agencies that need to be involved are engaged, in the best ways possible – the so-called ‘whole-of-government’ approach.

Bombings in Jakarta and elsewhere, recent allegations of plots of terrorism in Australia, fears of pandemics like Swine flu, and climate change effects like ocean acidification, have all emerged at around the same time in recent years. They highlighted the need to both understand *and prepare for* the spectrum of national security challenges equally confronting Australia and its Asia-Pacific neighbours. These challenges come in all forms and sizes, from natural disasters, to failing states and intervention operations in far-off countries.

Responses are just as diverse. They may range from joint/combined missions involving police, defence, aid agency, and the diplomatic corps like those in the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste, to cooperation on people-smuggling and terrorism with Asia-Pacific partners like Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines.

National security policy responses

Tabled last year by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Australia's first *National Security Statement* among other things set out a three part game-plan called ‘national security policy responses’. It comprises participation in an ‘activist diplomatic strategy’; delivering a versatile ADF ready to respond; and building a ‘national security community’ and capabilities that work together.

While this year's Australian *Defence White Paper* reprised much of this guidance, the *National Security Statement* game-plan suggests Defence clearly has a wider part in all these responses. These encompass its operational missions both overseas and at home - such as helping in Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, and the recent bushfires in southern Australia. Furthermore, it also gave Australia's 'national security community' organisations a wake-up call – including Defence - to look around both in Australia as well as their counterparts abroad, and see who does things best, why that is, and how to adopt those measures across the board.

This is where Defence has lessons it could offer: in how to plan for, prepare for and ultimately conduct complex and demanding responses in concert with a range of other partners. These partners include organisations like domestic emergency services, intelligence agencies, and health, infrastructure and attorney-general's departments.

Australia's Army, Air Force and Navy and the other parts of Defence have been working together for a long time; both in a tri-Service way amongst themselves, as well as with the armed forces of other countries - the United States, Britain and New Zealand historically, but increasingly, and more importantly, with regional partners in South-East Asia. Over the years, they have delivered functioning responses on the ground in a range of difficult and dangerous situations.

More recently, Defence has started the same process of sharing ideas with the Australian Federal Police and AusAID - both on the ground in places like the Solomon Islands and at the top decision levels back in Canberra. This sort of working together is hard, as each organisation has its own cultural baggage - quirks and uniqueness in jargon, processes and ways of looking at problems.

So achieving this is no mean feat; it is a constant task that demands lots of attention and good intentions. Nevertheless, there is no question of not doing it: for the military, the price of not getting it right can often be fatal. Even so, Australia needs to take this further, and where appropriate, encourage its partners to consider similar ideas.

Engaging early

The future holds complex and congested spaces where security challenges will occur – both in Australia and abroad - in places like heavily built-up cities in neighbouring countries, hard to reach regions in remote island chains, or even areas that have been contaminated, either by accident or deliberately. The dangers in these places will often be too extreme for non-military personnel to deliver public and government functions like essential services, infrastructure reconstruction, and transport hubs in a safe or effective way.

However, while the ADF is intrinsically able to operate and sustain itself in such circumstances, the ADF and its security partners – both foreign and domestic - must focus on agreeing *when* and *how* they need to commence working together, as well as building the willingness to do so. As agencies learn to engage with each other, this assists both planning for bad-news scenarios that might happen in the future, as well as responding quickly when an actual crisis hits.

This 'engaging early' applies equally to natural disasters such as tsunamis as it does to non-traditional threats, such as coordinated hostile hacking of computer networks of banks, public transport and power services, 'dirty' radiation bombs, biological attacks and even piracy. Indeed, 'engaging early' might be considered a prudent maxim for national security communities elsewhere.

Australia's *National Security Statement* provided a broader way of looking at what the ADF and the Defence Department have to offer for national security. Moreover, it has prompted people to think in more imaginative, less direct terms of how national security elements can improve their capacity to work cooperatively, learn from each other and draw on relative organisational strengths.

In doing so, governments can do much to foster the properly coordinated national security communities needed to confront the spectre of twenty-first century challenges - both in Australia and more widely.

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