

# Can Australia Meet Its Security Challenges?

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The Diplomat

16 August 2009

*The Australian Defence Force's operational experiences have produced lessons that can be adapted and exported to other security stakeholders as Australia moves through a challenging world, argues Nick Floyd, Chief of Army Visiting Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.*

Daily it seems we are graphically reminded of how much Australia needs a seamless, comprehensive approach to its security challenges. As the Federal Government prepares the successor document to its inaugural 2008 *National Security Statement*, the question arises of what needs to be done to improve the oft-quoted 'whole-of-government' approach to national security, and where Canberra can draw inspiration in crafting that approach.

Recent alleged domestic terrorism plots, bombings in Jakarta, pandemic fears and climate change repercussions have underscored the need to both understand and prepare for all of the national security challenges confronting Australia. From the interagency missions in the Solomon Islands and Timor, to cooperation on transnational crime with our Asia-Pacific partners and wider, these challenges stretch in form and guise - from natural disasters to regional fragility and global stabilisation concerns - and impact wherever and whenever Australia's national interests are engaged.

Tabled in December last year by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd the first *National Security Statement* lays some useful foundations, including a methodology to achieve national security through three broad 'national security policy responses': participation in an activist diplomatic strategy; delivering a versatile Australian Defence Force (ADF) ready to respond; and building a national security community and capabilities that work together. However, the work is acknowledged as not yet over – indeed, it requires a constant vigilance. What is clear is that Defence has a part in all of those responses, to assist in making national security interactions more effective.

Foreshadowing much of the *2009 Defence White Paper's* policy content, the *Statement* demanded a defence force ready to respond to diverse security challenges - a task in which the ADF is already engaged. However, the *Statement* also unfurled a more holistic backdrop that clearly implies a contribution from the ADF beyond a narrow definition of 'defence'. Accordingly, Defence has an opportunity to broaden the Government's understanding of its entire capacity to contribute to national security – measures that exist both in terms of its operations and activities, as well as the lessons it could offer to the national security community.

Given the somewhat imposing nature of Defence, both in size and scope, it's important to stress that these lessons don't constitute any expansionist notions. Defence is already extrapolating its heritage of interoperability between its various services and specialisations to working with other elements of the national security complex, such as the Australian Federal Police and AusAID. Nonetheless, the *Statement* sought to take that evolution further. Each department and agency clearly has something to learn from its partners; however, Defence has extensive recent experience and unique insights into multi-agency coordination, through its mass, diversity, complexity and history. Defence and the ADF can therefore identify where they have ideas to offer to the rest of the national security community, and share accordingly.

The future will doubtless hold complex and congested spaces where security challenges will occur – both here and abroad: and at times, these spaces will be too extreme for non-military forces to deliver essential public and government services and functions safely or effectively. By virtue of the fact that it must be able to support itself in austere, threatening or hazardous environments, the ADF is by nature structured to perform or support tasks wider than combat operations that might include assistance to deliver those functions.

This is not to suggest that the ADF should develop niche capabilities beyond those required to operate and self-sustain in such circumstances. Rather, the ADF and its national security partner agencies need to focus on cultivating a willingness to engage early across their legal and bureaucratic boundaries, when crises arise or contingencies are identified. Doing so allows time for several agencies to plan 'in parallel', to understand each others' capacities and limitations, and to strike the optimum balance of when and how to intervene and cooperate.

Engaging early applies equally to natural disasters such as bushfires as it does to non-traditional threats, such as cyber-attack and proliferation of weapons of mass effect. State governments must anticipate better those events that may be beyond their ability to cope. This self-awareness gives the spark to warn, and to start planning with Commonwealth agencies – especially the ADF. Similarly, the Commonwealth must continue to improve its ability to assess when States and Territories might require assistance. The necessary trust and confidence for such close cooperation will only develop as agencies increase understanding of each others' roles, and an effective way of gaining that trust is through shared training and education between organisations - such as we see today inside the ADF and Defence.

Beyond this broader-defined yet still familiar involvement however, the ADF has further contributions to the policy responses the *Statement* has called for - including in achieving the 'unprecedented degree of coordination among the nation's many security agencies and capabilities.'

The ADF's experience in interoperability and deliberate planning, and the machinery by which Defence determines its strategic priorities and allocations, can both be adapted and exported to other security stakeholders. Together, they can be used to help consider and form the difficult judgements on how best to respond to Australia's other security challenges at the national level.

Additionally, the way in which the military approaches its development of strategies – which is forged to operate with acute and diverse conditions of risk and uncertainty - could be recast and adapted to make a major contribution in crafting a whole-of-government strategic attitude to security. Importantly, moving to the next step of a true national security strategy not only needs to meet Australia's strategic challenges in a manner that is relevant and applicable to all the national security community: it must integrate meaningfully with Defence's own judgements on when and how to respond.

Against the canvas provided by the *National Security Statement*, the ADF mission must be recognised as supporting a broader spectrum of operations and activities, and an ability to transition rapidly between them. Moreover, in some respects at least, the recent collective experience of working together that Defence and the three Services of Army, Navy and Air Force holds - from operational theatres in the Middle East to back in Australia - has important lessons for creating that properly coordinated national security community.

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