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Security, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance policy implications of Australia's strategic outlook



Alan Ryan

Executive Director, Australian Civil-Military Centre¹

The Australian Defence Force will never deploy into a disaster relief or conflict contingency without being a part of a concerted multi-agency effort. Australia's national security arrangements are founded on whole-of-government coordination of diplomacy, defence, development, law enforcement, intelligence, and border protection capabilities. Defence planning cannot take place in a vacuum and Australia needs to adopt enhanced arrangements for multi-agency coordination and cooperation.

Key words: whole-of-government; civil-military; coordination; multi-agency; Australia.

Any consideration of Australia's strategic outlook needs to take into account a quiet revolution that has taken place at the heart of national security planning. This revolution is identified as a priority task in the 2013 National Security Strategy (Australian Government 2013). Over the next five years the Government has set as a priority the creation of 'effective partnerships to achieve innovative and efficient national security outcomes' (Australian Government 2013: iv). The National Security Strategy interprets this requirement to mean that:

"The contemporary national security environment requires creative responses that combine the expertise and authority of various government departments, foreign governments and non-government partners Effective partnerships are essential to delivering innovation and efficiency across the national security system. Our focus must be on harnessing information, ideas and capabilities from all sources to ensure our responses are effective and efficient." (Australian Government 2013: 42)

What this means is that, from the strategic level to the tactical level, all planning and preparation for operations needs to take the participation of a range of government agencies, international partners and non-government actors into account. Consultation and coordination of effort need to take place across operations; and planners, particularly military planners, need to be aware of their personal responsibility to include all the participants in an operation in their calculations. This requirement will place a greater stress on planners and complicates the situation in-theatre. Nonetheless, at the national level of preparedness and contingency response, there is no such thing as purely military planning – cohesive, coordinated civil-military responses will always define the way that we deploy national resources on operations in future.

We can be sure that government resources and personnel will continue to be deployed overseas in support of Australia's national interests. Those interests, as captured in successive Defence and Foreign Policy White

Papers and the National Security Strategy, are served by an increasingly unified national security system. Within the Federal Government alone, there are more than 40 agencies with a stake in the coordination of whole-of-government responses to crisis management. This does not mean that there has been a proliferation of agencies. What it means is that security is everyone's business in government and that playing some role in crisis preparedness or response permeates many activities in government.

It is therefore probably now inaccurate to talk of Australian foreign, defence and security policies in isolation. The achievement of the National Security Strategy has been to recognise that there is only government policy and that all portfolio policies and strategies are but a subset of that. Where once defence, foreign, development and border protection policies (to name but a few) were developed in isolation, that is no longer the case. This vision is not wishful thinking, but it does provide modern policy-makers, strategists and operational planners with unique and novel challenges in coordinating their efforts. How this will be accomplished and the challenges that now face government agencies are the subject of this paper.

Students of history will know that military operations have always occurred in a political context, subject to influences that far exceed those of mere operational objectives. Yet some commentators persist in trying to represent defence policy in isolation. To do so, is to miss the big picture – which is that, across the spectrum of potential contingencies, the whole-of-government response takes place in the context of a complex web of government agency plans and activities, subject to international government and international agency influences and in a world where some non-state actors can exert more influence than many governments.

In the context of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and even peace operations, Defence, though a part of the national response effort, may only be involved when for issues of timeliness or capability it is the best agency to respond. We need to recognise, though, that the causes and consequences of conflict or humanitarian need will

¹E-mail: alan.ryan@acmc.gov.au

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