

# ***Constraints on the formulation of Australian defence policy***

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*Mr James' duties with the Australia Defence Association have afforded him privileged access within the higher reaches of the Australian Defence Organisation for nearly 13 years. Such sustained access is uncommon and through it he has gained valuable insights into the formulation of Australian defence policy. Here he enunciates 10 major influences with which policy analysts and others involved in defence policy formulation must contend.*

**Key words:** Australia; defence; policy; constraints.

I had originally intended today to critique Australia's 2015 Defence White paper. As a consequence of several factors, not least of which was a change of prime ministers and defence ministers last September and a desire to ensure that the paper's proposals can be fully funded, the paper's release has been postponed until March 2016.

Instead, I will look at the development of defence policy in Australia and especially at the constraints inherent in the system. I have been Executive Director of the Australia Defence Association and its public spokesperson for nearly 13 years. I have gained privileged access to the higher echelons of Defence policy-making and have identified 10 constraints – key domestic influences on policy – which challenge policy makers. Before describing each of the constraints in turn, by way of context, I will tell you a little more about the Australia Defence Association.

## **Australia Defence Association**

Since 1975 the Australia Defence Association has been an independent, non-partisan, community-based, public-interest watchdog and 'think-tank' on strategic security, defence and wider national security issues. It represents the long-term public interest in helping ensure Australia is strategically and domestically secure and that current and future Australians are adequately defended.

The high-visibility aspect of our work involves me, as official spokesperson, bringing informed perspectives to the day-to-day public debate on these matters. This, though, is only a small proportion of our public-interest advocacy work, the bulk of which occurs within the halls of power. Indeed, our public-interest oversight primarily focuses on ministerial, governmental and parliamentary accountability for the effective formulation and execution of strategic and wider national security policy. This extends to the capabilities of the Australian Defence Force and Australia's six intelligence and security agencies, and to the effectiveness of their supporting departments.

## **Major Domestic Influences on Australian Defence Policy**

As I see it, policy analysts and others involved in defence policy formulation must contend with ten major domestic influences on Australia's defence policy: largely unresolvable structural issues; constitutional fluidity; perennial clashes of perspective; few or no votes in defence issues; weakening of parliamentary and ministerial grip on defence issues; increasing party-political polarisation; generally inadequate media coverage; inadequate public understanding and often interest in defence; conceptual misunderstandings; and the structure and culture of the Department of Defence. I will now consider each in turn.

## **Structural Issues**

Today, unlike 70 years ago in World War II, there is minimal community involvement in defence. Our modern wars are now fought, on the whole country's behalf, by a small, all-volunteer, professional defence force. There is no longer any mass community involvement in Australia's modern wars. There are 6.8 million families in Australia, but only around 15,000 had a family member serve in Afghanistan each year. There is now little community or even extended-family experience of military service or war. Consequently, there is diminishing understanding that national defence remains a universal civic obligation (like jury duty).

There is also a vertical fiscal imbalance. Defence investment is now perennially squeezed by federal spending on everything else, including governmental responsibilities previously undertaken mainly by the states and territories. The electorate now often expects the federal government to fix all their real and perceived problems. Politicians chase and 'buy' votes where voters are most vocal and tend to ignore or downgrade issues where voters are less concerned – even if through sectoral or individual self-interest, short-sighted thinking, apathy or ignorance.

## **Constitutional Fluidity**

Of the five major areas of government responsibility and expenditure, national defence is the only one that is wholly funded federally. But this is ignored by most politicians,

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voters and commentators. Defence investment is increasingly squeezed by voters demanding greater social spending federally. Defence investment (only by the federal government) is now dwarfed by overall national expenditure on each of social security (7:1), health (5:1) and education (4:1). In fact, spending on defence is now less than the annual interest we pay on national public debt.

Defence investment is ignored or neglected so often because 'affluenza', and the long grand-strategic peace since World War II, have generated community complacency, particularly the belief that our strategic circumstances will somehow 'always be like they have been' since 1945. Even when the inevitable 'catch-up' investment is required to reverse longstanding neglect of our defence capabilities such as after the 1999 East Timor crisis, ideologues and lobbyists for even greater social spending still decry defence investment as somehow 'largesse', 'generous' or 'unnecessary'.

The management of Australia's future strategic risk should not result in inter-generational inequity for future Australians, either through exposure to greater strategic risk or to increased and unfair 'catch-up' burdens financially, particularly because of under-investment now, by the current generation of Australians in providing their share of the necessarily long-term national defence infrastructure required.

Every Australian has some citizenship responsibility for Australia's strategic security. Thinking seriously about such issues is the least any Australian can and should do.

Australia's modern wars are deterred or fought by Australia and for Australia as a whole, not just by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in a community, political or popular sovereignty vacuum. Many, perhaps most, Australians, however, now think otherwise (however unconsciously). Every Australian has a reciprocal citizenship obligation to their fellow citizens deployed with the ADF, lawfully by our elected government, on Australia's behalf. Australia's treachery laws should enshrine this reciprocal citizenship obligation. They can do so without affecting democratic dissent or the other liberties our defence force helps protect.

### **Clashes of Perspective**

We have a 3-year electoral cycle, but a 4-year budgetary cycle (including three years of forward estimates). Our political cycle inevitably 'follows the money'. Media and public debate cycles tend to follow the politics; and this tendency to shorter-term foci is increasing. In contrast, defence planning, investment, execution and sustainment means there will usually be 5 – 15 year capability development cycles; and 15 – 45 year (or longer) equipment/platform lifecycles.

Few, if any, Australian governments will spend more now to save future governments (and future taxpayers) money. Investment in defence and strategic security is no different. Even though the country would undoubtedly benefit over the long run, and our defence force would be more capable, more efficient and more easily and cheaply sustained.

Indeed, history shows that both sides of politics in Australia have chequered records in attending to their national defence responsibilities. The Coalition parties have perhaps been better at disguising the inattention or neglect that has occurred on their watch. Bipartisan support for the United States alliance is partly based on the consequent

political convenience of being able to divert at least some defence investment elsewhere for electoral advantage.

### **Voting Patterns**

There are few or no 'votes in defence'. Most Australians do not consider that defence capabilities are essential national infrastructure (like highways, harbours, airports, *etc.*). Few if any Australians change their vote on a strategic security or defence issue alone. Most voters and many, probably most, politicians believe investing in our defence is somehow, and generally always, 'discretionary spending'. Most voters, and the politicians they elect, are prone to try to justify this belief by trotting out the flawed argument that defence investment is unnecessary if they cannot see a 'threat' and cannot see it right now.

Defence investment, however, is necessary to forestall or manage general strategic risk over the long term; not to counter specific 'threats' as they might be perceived or not at any one time. Bleating 'what's the threat', instead of paying the premium, is equivalent to not insuring your home and its contents unless you know in detail exactly when, where, how and by whom it will be burgled, burnt down or flooded, and with exactly what injury or damage to you.

### **Parliamentary and Ministerial Grip on Defence Issues**

There is limited experience of strategic security among members of parliament; cabinet collectively; ministers and shadow ministers individually; major and minor parties; party machines; policy development and review processes; and voters. As a consequence, there is an indifferent record of parliamentary and ministerial oversight of defence and an increasing dilution of civil-control-of-the-military.

Currently, only 23 out of 226 members and senators have ever served in the ADF – 11 full-time and 12 reservists; and of 12 former officers, only five have held rank above major.

Of post-war defence ministers, the last with combat experience was Lance Barnard (1972-75); and the last with diplomatic experience was Bill Morrison (June-November 1975). The last prime minister with combat experience was John Gorton (1968-71). The last deputy prime minister and cabinet minister with combat experience was Tim Fischer (1996-99). Excluding the present minister (Senator Payne), 22 ministers have held the Defence portfolio since 1965; and 11 served less than two years. Only five have served longer than 3 years. For 16, it was their final ministerial portfolio. Only five were war veterans (Paltridge, Gorton, Fairbairn, Barnard and Killen).

Parliamentarians are besieged by many calls on their time and they have varying attention spans. They tend to strictly prioritise and ration their work effort towards what they really care about or fear, or what will reward their career advancement. Few pick strategic security or defence as one of their priority issues. Most have no real interest in defence unless it appears to have a direct or immediate electoral or factional advantage to them individually – such as an ADF base in their electorate.

The more able defence ministers have tended to share one or more of the following characteristics: they had previously been a junior minister in the portfolio; they had seniority in parliament and party; they had been a senator more often than a member of the House of Representatives; they had been government leader (or deputy leader) in the Senate; they belonged to a different party faction to their prime minister (and hence were reluctant to be 'rolled' by the

prime minister in cabinet); and they were supported by capable junior ministers able to balance advice from the department, the ADF and outside, without excluding or downplaying any type of contribution.

A review of the people who have held the defence portfolio over the last 50 years indicates that the criteria that prime ministers apparently have used for the selection of defence ministers (in approximate priority order) are: personal and/or political loyalty to the prime minister; seniority in the ministry, the party and parliament house; balance in the cabinet and the ministry – states balance, factional balance and gender balance; whether they want the job; and lastly whether they would be good at it.

Similar criteria appear to have applied to selection of the opposition defence spokesperson (in approximate priority order): personal and/or political loyalty to opposition leader; front-bench seniority; factional balance of the front bench; the house in which the minister for defence sits (*i.e.* House of Representatives or Senate); the availability of suitable front-bench senators; whether they want the job; gender, house and state balance in the front bench; whether they would be good at it; and factional balance within their state.

### **Party-Political Polarisation**

The last four prime ministers have achieved this office without prior experience in one of the 'great offices of state' – those offices that have a great national-interest rather than a day-to-day partisan-political focus – namely treasurer, foreign minister or defence minister.

There is an increased tendency to talk at opposing arguments rather than address them. Coupled with this has been a rise of minor parties and single-issue pressure groups. Further, the 24/7 media cycle distracts from long-term and above-politics perspectives and distorts informed debate. Grandstanding and wedging put partisan advantage above the national interest.

### **Inadequate Media Coverage**

The media have become characterised by ever-diminishing strategic security experience and understanding. Few journalists today specialise in defence reporting and even fewer do it for long. Much media coverage of defence issues is now by generalist reporters, whereas there is continuing specialist coverage of business, science, health, economics, and similar matters. There are now very few through-career defence journalists – only one each at the *Australian Financial Review*, *The Age/The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, and Australian Associated Press. There are few, if any, experienced 'war correspondents'. Defence reporting is now predominantly by the parliamentary press gallery, which results in an overly 'political' focus.

The modern 24/7 media cycle, diminishing resources and staffing, and politicisation of coverage all affect comprehension, accuracy and professionalism. The slow death of newspapers; 'click bait' driving much online news coverage; the myth that journalists are somehow always neutral observers; political biases increasing across all media; and uninformed, sensationalist, biased or other unprofessional coverage; leads one to ask: "Is journalism still a profession?"

### **Inadequate Public Understanding**

There is ever-diminishing strategic security experience

and understanding in the community generally. The community now has little involvement, and consequently often not much interest in, Australia's modern wars. This diminishing community understanding of strategic security and defence issues leads to the perception that 'someone else', not me, is/should worry about it – 'she'll be right mate' attitudes, symptoms of 'influenza' and historical amnesia; and to widespread mythologies, such as 'anzackery' (*i.e.* all Aussies are 'natural super soldiers' so defence investment is unnecessary).

Many Australians mistakenly think they understand defence issues, the ADF or what military service or even war entails, through watching dramatised TV shows, films and documentaries. The world-wide-web is also convincing many Australians they know more than they actually do about anything and everything. The web also now allows the prejudiced, biased and unduly ideological to contact each other easily and to spread their simplistic, or worse, messages even more easily.

### **Conceptual Misunderstandings**

Much debate about Australia's strategic security wrongly assumes that this only concerns defending our territory – and only against potential 'invasion'. This particularly ignores that:

- defending Australia's sovereign freedom-of-action as a nation-state means protecting our national interests, not just our territory;
- grand-strategically, we have an enduring major national interest in preserving a rules-based international system (legally, commercially, strategically, morally, *etc.*); and
- the oceans around our island-continent are two-way maritime highways in both peace and war, not 'moats'.

The 'continentalist' mind-set fixated on defending only 'Australian territory' also tends to ignore that, as a first-world liberal democracy occupying an island-continent, our whole way-of-life depends on unimpeded maritime trade in an international system that works. Australia is geo-strategically, in perpetuity, a maritime power, not a continental one. Flawed constructs, such as the supposed 'sea-air gap' to our continent's north, need to be avoided. Some 10 per cent of the earth's surface (much of it ocean) is some form of Australian sovereignty, legal or other strategic responsibility – and New Zealand adds a further 8 per cent.

Grand-strategically the world sees Australia as a continent, not just a country. We should too. Being the only continent wholly the territory of one nation-state confers on us a major advantage grand-strategically. National unity is therefore not just a federalism, citizenship, equity or patriotism issue. If Australia were perhaps coloured yellow in maps of the world to accurately depict our 82 per cent aridity, we might face somewhat easier strategic security dilemmas.

### **Department of Defence Culture**

The legacies from Sir Arthur Tange's 1973 consolidation of the Defence group of departments include: whole-of-government and machinery-of-government process issues; atrophied inter-departmental defence committees; and a diluted distinction between military professional advice and departmental policy advice to Cabinet. Cabinet's National Security Committee went into a long hiatus until late 1990s. The Secretaries Committee on National Security has been

unable to replicate the full range of the old inter-departmental defence committee's oversight and policy co-ordination functions. Civil-control-of-the-military by ministers has been diluted and there are now insufficient ministers in the Defence portfolio (contrary to the recommendations of the 1957 Morshead Review). Strategic-level joint command of the ADF was delayed until 1982 nominally and 1989 effectively. The Chiefs of Staff Committee was weakened as an institution, both within and beyond the Department of Defence. Service Chiefs became regarded as deputy-secretary equivalents, rather than as leaders of major state institutions having vital roles nationally. Departmental efficacy has fluctuated; and departmental (and ADF) bureaucracy has kept growing in numbers, spread and management overhead to try to cope with the loss of ministerial grip and loss of statutory management boards.

There have been 13 external and seven internal reviews of Defence efficiency since 1982, but often with little or no enduring effect. The distinction between military professional and departmental policy functions has become increasingly blurred, hampering development of real 'jointery'; and the 'civilian-control-of-the military' fallacy has become entrenched culturally.

Two whole-career generations of ADF personnel and Public Service officials have grown up inside the post-1973 paradigm and its institutional culture. So have all our parliamentarians. All have watched and/or endured numerous and often repetitive second-principles 'reviews' and 'reform' plans. Real and long-lasting reform means instead starting from the top (ministerial oversight) and taking a genuine first-principles approach.

## Discussion

The two most important battles in Australia's strategic history were Trafalgar and Midway. Neither battle involved any Australian forces. Why were they so significant? Because Australia is girt by sea!

At Trafalgar, in the Atlantic Ocean off south-west Spain, on 21 October 1805, a Royal Navy fleet under Admiral Nelson defeated the combined fleets of France and Spain. British sea-power would not be seriously challenged again for nearly 100 years. British maritime supremacy on a global scale would enable the British settlement and development of Australia essentially unchallenged for over a century.

On 04–07 June 1942 in the central Pacific Ocean, one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea and six months after the attack on Pearl Harbour, the United States 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet under Admiral Nimitz defeated the Imperial Japanese Navy's combined fleet. Four out of six Japanese fleet carriers were sunk, whereas the United States Navy lost only one. Subsequently, the Japanese would be no longer capable of major maritime offensive operations at the strategic level, including during the campaigns in Papua, New Guinea and the Solomons. Japanese forces in the South Pacific would start to 'wither on the vine'. Japan could no longer win the Pacific War or even force a negotiated end to the conflict. Eventual Japanese defeat had become inevitable.

As a result, Australia would be safe from Japanese invasion or from significant raids from Japanese-occupied Indonesia and New Guinea. The United States would be well on the way to maritime supremacy in the Pacific for the next 75 years at least. Indeed, sea-lanes to and from Australia have been secure ever since – resulting in much

complacency; and Australia's future strategic security would be underwritten by our alliance with the United States (1951 ANZUS Treaty).

These two examples illustrate the geo-strategic significance of Australia being an island continent; and the only continent occupied by a single nation-state. Australia is located in the Asia-Pacific region; yet our national institutions, culture, ethnic composition and traditions have largely European roots; and our world view is driven by more than our geo-strategic position. Many, probably most, Asians do not regard us as 'Asian' in either strategic or cultural terms.

We have near-total dependency on ship-borne trade, which accounts for 99.7 per cent by volume and 75.6 per cent by value of our imports and exports. Hence, our standard of living and our way-of-life are largely dependent on secure sea-lanes. Secure sea-lanes require a stable, rules-based, international system that works co-operatively – strategically, legally and commercially. Australia also is responsible for around 10 per cent of the earth's surface. So Australia is a maritime country, but it is culturally saddled with a continental mind-set ('girt by beaches', rather than by oceans which are two-way highways).

## Conclusion

Australia is both a nation-state and an island continent located in the Asia-Pacific region, which from the inception of European settlement has been dependent on global maritime trade. The policy analysts and others involved in Australian defence policy formulation must contend with this geo-strategic reality and 10 other major influences which I have enunciated herein. A test of the forthcoming 2016 Defence White Paper will be how well they have managed these challenges.

**The Author:** Neil James is the Australia Defence Association's executive director and spokesperson. Prior to taking up his current position in 2003, he served full-time for 31 years in the Australian Army. A 1976 graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, his more senior appointments included foundation head of the joint intelligence branch at Headquarters Northern Command in Darwin; foundation director of the army's 'think-tank', the Land Warfare Studies Centre at Duntroon; and head of the operational plans branch at Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand. He continues to serve part-time as an active reservist in the Army History Unit – his Army duties have been structured to exclude potential conflicts of interest with his civilian duties.

Neil is also National Vice-President of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Australia Limited; and is a life member of the United Services Institute of the Australian Capital Territory. He has contributed chapters to several books and written numerous articles for professional journals on defence, peacekeeping and human rights law matters. This is the second time he has addressed the Institute in Sydney<sup>2</sup>. [Photo of Mr James: the author]

<sup>2</sup>His first presentation was on 30 September 2008. His paper "Defence white papers: an alternative view" was published in *United Service* 60 (1), 12 – 16, March 2009.