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National security policy in Australia: much achieved, more to do

an address to the Institute on 28 February 2012 by

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Dr Connery examines national security policy-making in Australia. He highlights three recent achievements of Australia's national security community; and identifies three areas where further attention might enhance that community's already effective performance.

Key words: national security; security policy-making; Australia.

Twenty-one years ago today, the guns fell silent again. In comparison to other wars, the campaign was fast and few people died. That much was clear. Some said warfare had changed for all time in the left hook through Kuwait. That was not so clear. Still, what is now often called 'The First Gulf War' capped a tumultuous period of change between 1989 and 1991; change that included the end of a longer confrontation, the Cold War.

Serious thinkers started to perceive and proclaim a unipolar world, the end of history and a 'new world order'. While those ideas were contested at the time and now seem somewhat anachronistic, the end of the Cold War heralded a new era that would make policy-making for national security even more challenging, complex and meaningful to a range of people: people who had not really recognized they were in the business of national security.

Today, those with an important part to play in national security come from a wide range of commonwealth departments and agencies. Some members of this broadened community work for state and territory governments.

But the national security community is deeper and more inclusive than government alone. Some business people contribute directly to national security, and many more are reliant upon the public good of security for business continuity in the face of physical and virtual attacks. The community sector – especially some charities and other non-government organisations – also play a role by delivering aid, rebuilding shattered countries and helping people overseas and at home to recover from disasters. So too do many academic institutions, think tanks and similar organisations, including the Royal United Services Institute. Your Institute plays a role in national security by analysing the security environment, and by bringing information to the wider community. Indeed, the great strength of this Institute is the way it contributes to public information

and the education of young military officers in particular.

This is a broad community that has met many challenges already, and will continue to face more in the future. It would be worth discussing all of these challenges: for instance, how changing power relativities in our region will influence Australia's future, and how broad system change might occur due to globalisation, climate change, demography and resource distribution. However, I will concentrate on matters less discussed, but still vitally important to all involved in national security: specifically, policy-making arrangements that support our national security. So let me begin by selecting three things that have been achieved in national security over the last few years, before moving to areas where there is more to do over the next 5-10 years.

Achievements

Some really good news stories can be told about efforts to promote and enhance Australia's national security since 2008. I wish to highlight just three.

An enhanced sense of community

The first of these is the enhanced sense of community among national security professionals. Anecdotally, I have seen a greater degree of understanding emerge among people from different parts of the national security community over the past two years of courses at the National Security College. Indeed, their post-course evaluations emphasize the 'networking opportunities' provided at the College, and alumni often refer to the way new contacts help make their jobs easier.

For those unfamiliar the College, it is a joint venture between the Commonwealth Government and the Australian National University. Its main work involves delivering educational opportunities in the executive sphere to government and more generally to post-graduates. The College also has an active research agenda and conducts outreach events that help bring the best thinking about national security to Canberra, and

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take the conversation outside Canberra too. College programmes, especially the executive education programmes, help national security professionals to:

- understand the broader context for their work;
- appreciate the roles, capabilities, strengths and challenges faced by other organisations; and
- see the benefit of collaboration.

These programmes make a practical contribution by explaining structures, processes and norms for national security policy-making. Taken together with many other changes, the College is helping to build a sense of community.

This enhanced sense of community was also identified in two separate reports from last year. The first, a 2011 report on leadership in the national security community, noted that: "The majority (of national security officials interviewed) felt that the broader community would continue and would operate together more effectively the longer it was in existence." (Shanahan 2011: 38)

The Independent Review of the Intelligence Community also reported: "a major transformation in how well the Australian Intelligence Community is working together. Their working relationships are particularly strong at the leadership level and can be further enhanced through joint senior management and leadership training." (Cornall and Black 2011: 20 – 21)

Both reports suggest the old stovepipes – or cylinders of excellence – are growing lateral connections. It might even be possible to claim the stovepipes are 'breaking down'. This is an indicator of positive change.

On balance, I think progress towards building a national security community has been positive and beneficial. But later I would like to come back to one aspect of community building where I think more needs to be done.

Practical co-ordination

Practical co-ordination is denoted by efforts to create smoother decision-making processes and reduce friction in the system. Evidence of practical co-ordination might be hard to marshal, because it is seen most clearly in meetings. Still, there are indicators that point towards this as a second area of achievement.

The first is in the implementation of the *National Security Statement*[2]. This 'first of a kind' statement had big aims, and it failed to meet all the expectations of some. But the statement certainly provided real motivation for a number of significant achievements, such as the creation of the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service and the Crisis Coordination Centre, which opened in late 2011. Both are good examples of measures to enhance practical co-ordination. This suggests that a further prime ministerial statement, or perhaps a more comprehensive document articulating national security policy, would be worthwhile.

Indeed, even the process of reflection and discussion that occurs around such statements is worthwhile if managed efficiently.

The second indicator of practical co-ordination is the acceptance of the National Security Adviser (NSA) role. You would be aware that we now have our second NSA, Dr Margot McCarthy. That appointment was important because it shows that a prime minister different to the initiator sees value in the position. What is also important is the broad acceptance of the role. There seem to be few who would argue against having a NSA today. Indeed, most seem to see benefit in having a very senior and trusted official performing the traditional mandate of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – co-ordination and advice to the prime minister.

Still, some think the NSA needs to be a statutory position: they see potential for role confusion with the Director-General of the Office of National Assessments. However, the influence of the NSA is more important in this system than its authority. Influence is fungible of course, but there would be no better way to crimp the NSA's flexibility than to have a black letter statement declaring what this role is allowed to do. The current flexibility allows the role to expand and contract as situations and needs change. Further, we live in a Westminster system where ministers have responsibility. The NSA must convince others of the merits of a position rather than impose a will. This mode of operation requires trust, a collegial spirit and a broad perspective over national security matters: factors that speak volumes for the current arrangement.

Another indicator of practical co-ordination is the National Security Strategic Policy Framework. This framework has not been fully described in public yet, but it is possible to see two important and innovative components. The first is the coordinated national security budget. This idea was borrowed from indigenous policy, and it shows some potential to enhance co-ordination within the national security community. Colleagues have described to me some good outcomes from this process, especially where it allowed officials, the NSA and ultimately cabinet to examine related spending proposals. Still, the process is immature and others have described how it remains difficult to make decisions to take money from one area and give it to another. Moreover, of course, the exclusion of Defence's main budget from this process means 'the elephant in the room' is excluded from direct consideration.

The framework will also likely include other planning and decision support tools, including a national security capability plan. This is certain to be a complex and challenging task, but even modest enhancements to the way equipment, training and policy are brought together has the potential to make overall budget savings, and to further enhance the community's operational capability.

Operational successes

The growing community and new co-ordination measures have contributed to a third area of achievement: significant operational successes in recent years.

Over this period, we have seen degrees of success in major overseas operations in the Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Iraq and Afghanistan. On the homeland security side, our only real insight into operational successes against national security threats – including terrorists, people smugglers and the unseen cyber threats – comes from newspaper articles and official public reports. For instance, we have an insight into the success of counterterrorism operations from the Cornall and Black Review, which identified disrupted plots that had resulted in 38 prosecutions and 22 convictions. Also according to Cornall and Black, other potential plots have not been allowed to develop thanks to more than 80 foreign nationals being prevented from coming to Australia on security grounds and more than 50 Australians being denied the opportunity to travel to train for, support or participate in, terrorist activities (Cornall and Black 2011: 16). These operations reflect great credit on the members of the national security community – from the planning and policy side, to the operators and logisticians. All deserve our thanks.

There are more areas of achievement worthy of mention, but these three are significant because they could allow a new culture to emerge around national security. This culture should be based on the idea of collaboration, and providing those charged with pro-tecting and promoting our national security with the motivation and tools to share information and work towards common goals.

Suggestions for Enhancing Performance

Of course, there is more to do to promote the national security community. In the spirit of constructive criticism and a desire to build on recent advances, I now wish to discuss three areas where further attention could enhance the community's functionality and performance: maintaining momentum in reform; minor adjustments to national security policy structures; and further work to build the sense of community among national security professionals.

Maintaining momentum in reform

Maintaining the momentum of improvement and reform within the professional community is essential, but there seems to be some chance this could stall. Stalling would pose important risks for Australia, especially because the gains made to enhance the community are still relatively new and possibly subject to reversal. Maintaining momentum will require a number initiatives, but before looking for these it is worth asking why the perception of a 'momentum problem' is growing.

I think we can look back to the *National Security Statement* to see some of the reasons. First, some important and essentially new concepts contained in the statement were not fully developed. That, of course, is a hazard involved in writing for a broad audience. For instance, the statement defined national security in terms of very broad objectives. It separately included the areas of 'social cohesion' and 'long-term economic strength' as security interests – areas that hitherto have been the province of social and economic policy, not national security policy.

The inclusion of organised crime, energy and natural disasters also led to a rapid increase in people who were now 'of the community'. Yet many of these agencies were ill-equipped to be part of the community immediately, especially in terms of information technology, personnel security clearances and perhaps also in an incomplete understanding of the core issues of national security. And further, the idea of community was 'taken as a given' in the statement, as though all groups have always functioned collaboratively.

In short, the statement contained some unclear concepts, did not explain the reasoning behind the identified national security interests, and did not explain the ways to build a national security community. These shortfalls led many to ask questions about the breadth of national challenges that are now considered 'security issues'. Simply, some think senior officials and ministers are overburdened or side-tracked with problems that do not concern existential challenges for Australia. In a related concern, some think too many agencies and people are becoming involved in national security. There is also a perception that co-operation at lower levels does not reflect the level of collegiality in the senior ranks (Cornall and Black 2011: 20 – 21).

These criticisms are important because invoking 'national security' allows a government to take extraordinary measures to confront a problem. In theory, when a matter becomes one of 'national security', liberty can be curtailed, significant money can be spent, and lives can be lost. Practically, it also meant new methods of communication, broader structures and a new mind-set were needed to manage the broader definition. So while the first *National Security Statement* was a significant and successful step, some form of authorita-tive follow-up could promote clarity.

Greater clarity could be provided by a second prime ministerial statement. This would be welcomed. It would allow the government to outline its considerable successes since 2008, to provide more detail on key innovations such as the strategic policy framework, and perhaps to outline a few new initiatives. But unless a second statement was based on new conceptual thinking, it would not take us much further forward. Nor would it be likely to make a substantive contribution towards consensus building about national security within the professional community.

To build consensus, there would be value in considering a temporary, bipartisan commission on Australia's national security to: examine the conceptual and structural basis of national security; consider future challenges in the near and far terms; consider the options for articulating national security policy; and suggest ways to position Australia to meet the challenges the nation will surely face over the next 20 – 30 years. The commission could report to the prime minister and could focus on the distinctions between 'security' and 'safety', between 'protection' and 'resilience', between 'intelligence' and 'information', and

between 'risk', 'strategy' and 'policy'. And while noting the government's recent appointment of a part-time national security legislation monitor, a commission such as this could also consider a broader question of whether the constitutional and legislative framework for national security is robust and effective. Such a commission could be led by former political leaders with suitable credentials (including at least one from a state government), and include former officials, academic, business and community sector leaders as members.

What should the commission produce? For one, we should expect a well-argued report that can inform the government's approach to future policy. But we could also expect a commission like this to provide leadership on the question of national security and, if successful, a coherent vision for Australia's future security policy.

Minor structural adjustments

The second area for enhancing national security revolves around some modest but important proposals to change aspects of the policy-making structures and process within the existing conceptual framework.

The first proposal aims to give national decision-makers the thing they need most: time. The senior dedicated decision-making forum is the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC). NSC is somewhat opaque, but analysts such as Ross Babbage have identified how NSC is choked with decisions that others could reasonably make (Babbage 2008: iii – iv).

Procurement decisions are one specific area. The Mortimer Review of 2008 suggested forming a sub-committee of NSC for defence procurement, but the Minster of Defence did not agree because a sub-committee of the NSC might raise the workload of the committee by requiring three Ministers (Defence, Treasurer, and Finance) to attend both a sub-committee and a full committee meeting to deal with less complex procurement items (Department of Defence 2009: 21).

Other options were considered, including giving more authority to the Secretaries Committee on National Security or changing the delegations for procurement decisions. The latter would allow an 'exchange of letters' between ministers to suffice on smaller decisions. However, it does not appear as though either of these suggestions was adopted.

Further, it is not clear whether the burden for NSC of additional procurement matters arising from the national security capability plan have been considered yet. If this plan is treated like the Defence Capability Plan, then NSC can expect more work. And if Defence was complex enough, imagine the work that will be needed when the competing demands of different departments and agencies need to be fashioned into a coherent, long-term plan. Making some change to decision-structures and delegations now, before this 'bow wave' of work hits, would seem sensible.

One additional possibility could be a sub-committee of NSC based on the relevant junior ministers and parliamentary secretaries. This grouping, perhaps chaired by the deputy prime minister, could consider less complex defence and national security procurement decisions and make recommendations to NSC which, if agreed, could simply concur with the proposals rather than re-consider each in detail. This amended structure would have the added benefit of exposing more government ministers to defence and national security issues.

The second idea is to give the National Security Adviser more time. At present, the span of the NSA's responsibility seems to match the breadth of the national security statement, and this breadth has seen the NSA standing immediately behind the prime minister in all manner of events, including natural disasters.

It is only right that the prime minister should have their closest adviser with them. But in times of natural disaster, would it not be optimal to have an emergency management professional there? We saw this occur in a few instances during last year's Queensland floods, when the director-general of Emergency Management Australia provided that support.

Perhaps this instance of having specialised advice signals a need for additional support in the form of a national resilience adviser.[3] Acting as a deputy to the NSA and senior specialist adviser to the prime minister, this officer would be responsible for coordinating commonwealth and state natural disaster and resilience policy and, when disaster strikes, coordinate commonwealth input to the response.

We should anticipate a real need for someone to be thinking about these challenges from a whole-of-government, and indeed whole-of-nation, viewpoint because we should expect more intense extreme weather events into the future. And we should also expect to have that advice in an appropriate position, and at an appropriate level in government. While a national resilience adviser might sound excessive, this role exists in kind already. Formalising this position would enhance that adviser's status and lend weight to coordination efforts in this increasingly important area of public policy.

Enhancing lower-level relationships in the national security community

The last area where more work would be useful concerns improving the sense of community among professionals at two levels: relationships among working-level officials within the commonwealth; and among commonwealth, state and territory counterparts.

The enhanced sense of community at senior levels in the Commonwealth Government was discussed above as an achievement. However, Cornall and Black went on to express their concern about collaboration at lower levels (Cornall and Black 2011: 20 – 21).

Of course, different experience levels, the impact of culture, and limited opportunities to work outside one's department might inhibit collaboration at lower levels. And if that is so, then more work is needed to promote this sense of community at lower levels of the Commonwealth Government.

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[3] I am grateful to Andrew McBride for originally suggesting this idea.

There is another level where more work is needed. I think a broader review would find that state and commonwealth officials do not share a strong sense of community yet. That is not to say arrangements such as the National Counter-Terrorism Committee are not helping to build a sense of community in that area. The extensive counter-terrorism arrangements developed in recent years have clearly had a good impact on cross-jurisdictional co-operation, as some interviewees mentioned in the National Security College's report on collaborative leadership (Shanahan 2011). However, that report also highlighted: "concerns raised by interviewees from state bodies included the lack of understanding by federal agencies of the impact of national security decision-making at the state level…". The reason given by interviewees who held this view was fairly straightforward: "…due largely to the fact that the experience of most senior officials in Canberra was limited to the federal system" (Shanahan 2011: 24).

This insight provides a clue to possible directions for future personnel policies. One way to build community at both the junior commonwealth and state-commonwealth levels might be to emulate the United States national security professional development plan, which allows for inter-agency rotations and mandates certain experiences for national security professionals. While this approach may provide some ideas for the future, I think more modest proposals should be tried first. Some of these could include:

- secondments between state and commonwealth agencies;
- further opportunities to discuss co-ordination and collaboration challenges in a non-confrontational way – perhaps in an academic conference-style meeting;
- enhanced support for 'junior' networking opportunities – such as the Kokoda Foundation's Young Strategic Leaders' Forum – both in terms of encouragement by senior leaders and perhaps some funding; and
- further educational opportunities that bring more junior colleagues together, including those from the state and territory governments.

Clearly, enhancing collaboration among less senior professionals will require a multi-pronged approach. And I think the NSA is the person – or more accurately, the office – to take this forward in the near future. Only a minimal outlay in money would be required to make some small but important enhancements. The most significant resource needed is senior leadership attention to the great benefits that enhancing collaboration below them, and among the different jurisdictions, could bring. Beyond that, there is a need to enhance collaboration among those outside government, especially those in the business, academic and community sectors. But that is a topic for another time.

Conclusion

Those charged with making and implementing national security policy in Australia have done a remarkable job over the last decade, as evidenced by their operational successes. There is also evidence that collegiality, collaboration and coordination are increasing and are contributing to good outcomes.

Of course, there is room to enhance the effectiveness of the national security community. Establishing a clear conceptual basis for national security, and a shared agreement about Australia's future challenges, would be a good start. To this end, a bipartisan commission is proposed. There might be other ways, such as another closed 'Smith Review'[4], but a public discussion about national security would be worthwhile.

Some minor modifications to the decision-making structure are also suggested to create more time for senior decision-makers. A sub-committee of the National Security Committee to consider some procurement matters would pay dividends; and creating a specialised national resilience adviser could create more time for the National Security Advisor.

Finally, an investment in education and awareness building could improve collaboration among less-senior national security professionals within the commonwealth, and among commonwealth and state officials. In time, proposals also will be needed to bring business, academia and the community sector into planning where appropriate.

These modest proposals aim to maintain sensible momentum towards building a sustainable, scalable and effective national security community. Much has been achieved in this direction so far, but there is still more to be done.

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[4]Review of homeland and border security by Mr Ric Smith in 2008.