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

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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

long pre-date military involvement and linger long after a military involvement. Accordingly, Defence planners need to see themselves as part of a continuum of national and international response and plan to maximise the impact of their contribution accordingly. This can only be done if all actors have a detailed and sophisticated appreciation of the capabilities and capacities of other agencies and ensure that lines of communication and coordination are fully open in advance of, during, and after a crisis contingency.

Whole-of-Government Planning

Considerable work has been put into developing a national strategic planning framework in recent years. Yet the idea of a framework is more a guide to coordination within Defence and more broadly across government than a prescriptive model (ONA 2010; Strategic Policy Division 2010). The National Security Strategy uses the phrase 'a unified national security system'. The system is a work-in-progress, and by its very nature is unlikely to ever achieve perfection. Those who seek certainty in strategic prediction are doomed to disappointment – the strategic environment, being the product of infinitely combinable variables, is protean by nature. I emphasise the word 'protean' because in my experience commentators who seek to reduce their understanding of the strategic challenges facing government just do not understand the world we live in.

Insofar as we have the ability to deter, prevent or mitigate particular conflicts or emergencies, we can be sure that other, perhaps entirely unpredictable, contingencies will arise. Therefore, attempts to reduce national contingency response systems to rigid structures or to seek a one-size-fits-all planning methodology across government will fail. It is a sign of the relative maturity of our strategic system that government is not looking towards such quick fixes, but is focusing its efforts on developing the strengths of our existing system. There is a great deal that we can do to improve operational capability and effectiveness for conflict and disaster management overseas, but it needs to start by improving cross-agency understanding and facilitating communication across the whole system of government.

We do need to be careful of what we ask for when we seek to achieve a whole-of-government approach to crisis preparedness and contingency response. Adjectives such as 'integrated', 'comprehensive' or 'uniform' are too easily bandied about. Nobody denies that working across agency boundaries to deliver efficient and effective outcomes is essential. Where we run into problems is where some people or organisations interpret that to believe that government's interests are served by doing everything the same way. That is demonstrably not the case.

Over the past decade, a number of projects have been undertaken across government to examine the utility of an integrated whole-of-government planning approach at both the senior leadership level and the working level. These projects include the Australian Public Service Commission's 2004 report on whole-of-government responses to Australia's priority challenges; the Defence Science and Technology Organisation's crisis management improvement programme; and the Australian Civil-Military Centre's multi-agency peace and stabilisation operations project. Collectively, these projects have identified that government

departments and agencies do not need to adopt the same planning processes, rather a mutual understanding of, and respect for, each agency's approach is required, as well as the identification of appropriate interface points across these planning approaches where agencies should come together to coordinate their activities and de-conflict where necessary.

What many observers have failed to appreciate is that each department and agency has developed planning mechanisms to meet their specific requirements in managing conflicts and disasters overseas. For example, the military has developed mission focused, highly structured planning processes, that clearly delineate between strategic, operational and tactical planning. Given the tempo of many military operations, the need to get inside an opponent's decision-making cycle and the sheer logistic complexity of many military operations, this is generally the most efficient and effective way for the military to operate. It also makes military forces highly interoperable with other military forces.

Civilian agencies, in contrast, must maintain significant flexibility within their planning mechanisms, which often incorporate strategic, coordination, design, and implementation considerations within the same process. This allows for devolution of decision making down to implementing personnel (where appropriate) enabling rapid adjustments to activities as the situation changes. This is similar to the German military concept of *Auftragstaktik* –'mission tactics' or leading by mission. For the military, though, the recent trend if anything has been in the opposite direction towards greater central control. In a networked age, the military has become more, not less connected making it possible for the remote senior commander to directly control the soldier on the ground. This can be a good thing in a military organisation – but it might lead to disastrous inflexibility in a nuanced diplomatic or aid environment.

Work that the Australian Civil-Military Centre has done with stakeholders from across government, and has demonstrated in real-time exercises with participants from domestic and international counterparts, has revealed fundamental differences in planning approaches include planning methodologies, relationship to the environment and definitions of end-states. For example, militaries undertake detailed fact-based and assumption-based planning before entering the crisis environment. Their planning is often focused on controlling the environment to achieve the mission end-state and stabilizing that environment in line with pre-conflict or pre-disaster levels – the 'return to normalcy approach'. In contrast, civilian agencies tend to delay detailed planning until they can make an on-the-ground assessment of the needs of the population, the capacity of the host nation and the gaps that need to be addressed. Their planning processes generally focus on working closely with the environment of the affected state and addressing the key drivers of conflict or vulnerability to disaster impacts – the 'build back better' approach.

Neither approach is wrong. In fact, striking a balance between the two approaches will often best achieve the dual objectives of: stabilizing a crisis and preventing further harm; and then transitioning to an approach that will prevent the recurrence of the conditions that caused the emergency in the first place.

Civil-Military Cooperation

The capabilities that we have in government range from a potent highly-focused and disciplined force, through to bespoke civilian agencies which provide considerable flexibility and nuanced response options. There are also too many humanitarian relief organisations, non-government organisations and international organisations in the operational environment to count. They also have important and legitimate contributions to play – but they will not be 'just like us'. Working together on a mission can occur across a spectrum from coexistence, through coordination to cooperation (Figure 1).

At the lower end of the collaboration scale is coexistence – that is the sort of relationship you have with international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. On an operation, their role is to be independent, impartial and neutral. They give away their advantage if they do more than that. A range of other non-government organisations, depending on the tempo of operations, may communicate, coordinate or collaborate with you. In a humanitarian assistance operation, they are quite likely to interact more. As you move up the spectrum of operations towards war-fighting, the ability to coordinate with civilian agencies, government or non-government, declines.
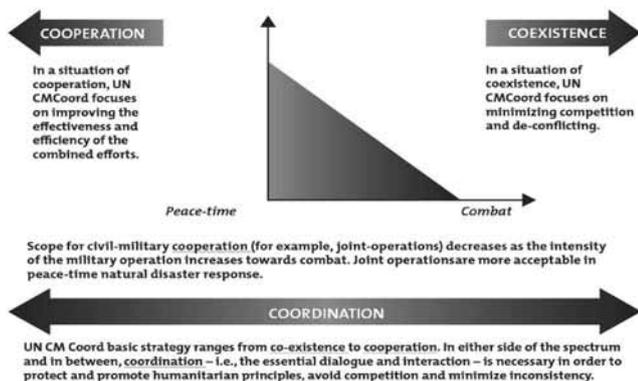
Figure 1: The scope for civil-military collaboration within government – see UNOCHA and IASC (2008: 17) ['UN CM Coord' is United Nations crisis management coordination]

So we need to be very careful when talking about coexistence, communication, coordination, collaboration or cooperation. People use these phrases interchangeably, but in the security community they do mean fundamentally different things.

These differences have been aired in a publication jointly issued by the Australian Civil Military Centre (on behalf of the Australian Government), and the Australian Council for International Development (Australia's peak coordinating body for non-government overseas aid and international development organisations). The document (ACMC and ACFID 2012) aims to develop mutual understanding of the roles, mandates, missions, cultures and objectives of the various civil-military stakeholders engaged in operations overseas. It is necessary for all parties involved in offshore deployments not only to understand the role and capabilities of their own organisation, but also to have a working knowledge of the mandate and functions of the other entities with which they will deal.

Conclusion

Within government, there is a spectrum of collaboration from coexistence through to cooperation. We operate in a civil/military/police environment where we cooperate through capacity building, and through understanding and respecting the essential and separate mandates of each of the agencies. The creation of the Civil-Military Centre has enabled us to get non-government organisations, diplomats, aid officials, police, the Attorney General's Department, intelligence agencies, and the full range of military capability in one room and talking the same language. We have found that they have more in common than they have points of difference. At those meetings, there is a strong focus on determining which agency has the lead and which agencies are best placed to provide support.

The Centre's whole-of-government role is to fill in the cracks between agencies – we do not try to make the agencies all the same; and we work with the stakeholders. We need to accept when a situation that we are in is not perfect or perfectible. We need to be comfortable with that complexity and work together to achieve the best outcomes.

The National Security Strategy identifies effective partnerships and improved information sharing arrangements as a key priority over the next five years. I predict that those tasks will last well into the future as improved technology, but at the same time, an increasingly crowded contingency response community, place competing pressures on our ability to coordinate the increasingly nuanced response options at the Government's disposal.

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