

Island Australia: improving resilience in a rapidly-changing region

Opening Address

A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 23 November 2021 by

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This seminar provides an excellent opportunity to delve deeper into our defence strategy, given a rapidly-changing region and a much-less benign security environment. An appropriate response to change is vital for our prosperity and welfare. Sound decisions are required.

Key words: climate change; cyber; defence strategy; demographics; grey-zone activities; military modernisation; space; submarines.

As Patron of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales, I am delighted to open this major seminar on “Island Australia: improving resilience in a rapidly-changing region”. The topic is timely and the seminar provides an excellent opportunity to delve deeper into our defence stance and strategy, which, despite recent headlines, involves so much more than submarines.

In 1888, my predecessor, Governor Charles Carrington, became the first patron of what was then the United Service Institution of New South Wales. Carrington was a military man – in fact a former lieutenant-colonel in the Royal Buckinghamshire Infantry. He would have naturally supported the main object of the Institution, which was at that time the higher professional education of officers. He and his wife Cecilia also lived here at Government House and developed quite a reputation for fulfilling their social role with warmth and generosity. A story is told of how, during the 1887 celebration of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee, they banqueted a thousand poor boys of Sydney who received medals struck for the occasion and were modestly told by Carrington of his own family’s humble origins in 18th century trade. Lady Carrington also established the Jubilee Fund to relieve distressed women; and her management of it surprised contemporaries by a business capacity with which women are rarely credited. Quite the power couple! I am proud to continue the Carringtons’ line of vice-regal patronage and I thank this seminar’s hosting organisation for their 133-year role of successfully informing debate on defence and security studies.

If we did not know it already, last year’s 2020 Defence Strategic Update (Defence 2020) underlined the rapidly-changing region we live in and the need for a defence policy that is “agile and adaptive”. It refers to factors such as military modernisation in the Indo-Pacific, expanding cyber capabilities in the region, the undermining of confidence in the rules-based order, and the conduct of grey-zone activities, as factors that are making our security environment much-less benign than it was only five years ago at the time of the 2016 Defence White Paper (Defence 2016).

Stepping back to take an even broader picture of change, participants in the CSIRO’s 2019 Australian National Outlook, explored multiple potential futures and identified contrasting scenarios for Australia. Looking ahead to 2060, they identified six challenges, or we could say opportunities, for our nation: the rise of Asia; technological change; climate change; environment demographics; trust; and social cohesion (CSIRO

2019). These factors also have a direct bearing on the consideration of our national defence and security.

Another dimension is the whole area of space warfare, which I was introduced to recently when researching the development of space law. In 2020, the United States released its Defence Space Strategy, in which it defined space as “a distinct war-fighting domain essential for maintaining military superiority” (Defence 2020). Space has been used at least twice for anti-satellite weapon testing, the last occasion being in 2019 when India conducted asset testing incurring the ire of the United States, albeit with only a mild rebuke¹. India, of course, is a member of the strategic QUAD alliance which may explain why a stronger stance was not taken.

Although the theme of this seminar is fascinating, the subject matter is not abstract or merely academic. An appropriate response to change is vital for our prosperity and welfare. Sound decisions are required, coupled with the right actions.

I wish you well for your deliberations as you enjoy the expertise of an impressive complement of high-profile speakers including: Commander Australian Fleet; Commander Forces Command; Air Commander Australia; Commander 2nd Division; the New South Wales Defence Advocate; the Chief Executive Officer of Thales Australia, New Zealand; and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Newcastle. I commend the organising committee and I thank the Institute’s vice-patrons for their support.

I now declare the seminar formally open and I look forward to the important updates to come through the webcasting of content and publication of these proceedings.

References

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¹Davenport, Kelsey (2019). Indian ASAT test raises space risks. Arms Control Association, May 2019. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-05/news/indian-asat-test-raises-space-risks> accessed 20 December 2021.