

Vision, coherence and rigour

Events continue to require increasing Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Australian Federal Police (AFP) deployments across our region and further afield. Unsurprisingly the AFP and its State counterparts now have insufficient members for the 200 or so offered to PNG in our latest commitment to regional country rescuing. The AFP cannot be blamed; it met the sudden challenges of the Bali bombing investigation and the Solomons' rescue mission with distinction.

More than ever we need to draw intellectual breath and apply long-term vision, coherence and rigour in our national security planning. We must re-examine our principles and our sorry record in structuring, resourcing and sustaining our defence force and our intelligence, security and law-enforcement agencies. Appropriate levels of funding would then follow.

Our lack of a coherent and long-term vision concerning national security has resulted in insufficient investment. Despite Government rhetoric and its comparatively good record to date in at least facing up to national security issues, there has been no real increase in defence spending, for example, above the three per cent extra per year promised in the now long outmoded 2000 Defence White Paper.

Even this is only a partial catch up for the chronic underinvestment of the last three decades. There has been

no attempt to close the \$120 billion gap between the spending promised in (and needed to flesh out) various Defence White Papers since 1987 and the money actually delivered to build and sustain the ADF in doing what we require it to do.

The \$12 billion unfinanced black hole in the current 10-year, \$50 billion Defence Capability Plan is but one result of this sustained underinvestment.

Not since the late 1960s has public support for a large increase in defence and security spending been so strong. We support prudent federal budgets, however, a further \$2–3 billion annually must be injected into our national security spending just to catch up and face the future with reasoned confidence. Hard decisions are required now to properly fund the hard strategic challenges we face.

Increased funding for defence, in particular, needs to be matched with widespread reform in how it is managed. Many of the numerous flaws could be fixed quickly and easily. ADF commanders must be allowed to actually command, and be allowed to give military advice to the government without fear or favour and unfiltered and untrammelled by bureaucratic interference.

A resurgence of ill-informed commentary from some academics, journalists and other would-be national security 'experts' has not helped the debate required. Just as 'Generals' are often accused of trying to fight the last war, these would-be 'experts' fall into a mirror-image trap. It is simply naïve at best to believe that you can conclusively foresee future threats and the nature of future warfare, and then dictate how the ADF should be configured in detail accordingly.

Force structuring and equipping the ADF remains too prone to the eddies and flows of ideological (and often mindless Anti-American) posturing, the latest media opinion scare, strategic 'faddism' by Defence bureaucrats and academics, silly accounting constraints and even, at times, party-political whim or pork barreling.

Time is running out for Australia. Strategic Update 2003 was a profound disappointment and provided no vision or path to reform. A new, comprehensive and integrated National Security White Paper is a matter of urgent national importance. Most importantly, the Government must clearly enunciate what Australia needs the ADF for and what it is to do—now and in the future.

Long-term vision and intellectual rigour is needed to maximise the versatility of the ADF for a wide range of barely foreseeable and unforeseeable tasks 20–30 years out in a mostly unknowable future. Government guidance on defence, including substantially increased funding, should follow this principle accordingly.

It does not mean limiting the ADF's structure and funding to what we now assume or guess might happen, or what current strategic planning fads clamour for. ♦

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