

# Australia's security agenda

John Howard

**A**t the recent *Global Forces 2006* conference conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute I was invited to share some thoughts about Australia's security agenda. I started by stating the very obvious and that is that the core of Australia's security agenda is quite straightforward. It is to protect and defend our people, and our interests, and our way of life. In practice, Australia has a history of seeing its own security as intertwined with the security of others and with the forces that shape the global system.

## A global approach

The belief that the protection of our continent and citizens starts well beyond our shores has formed an essentially unbroken line in Australian strategic thinking – from the sacrifices on the Western Front 90 years ago to our commitments today in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Geography alone has never determined our strategic horizons. Australia's basic security interests have remained remarkably stable over time. Beyond the primary one of territorial integrity, they have involved a global power balance, favourable to our interests and to those of our allies; secure sea and air lanes as sinews of peace and prosperity; and a framework of international norms conducive to individual freedom, economic development and liberal democracy.

Throughout our history, these goals have given direction and purpose to Australia's security agenda, against foes of various stripes and in very different strategic contexts. Beyond the core responsibility of the defence of Australia, the Australian Defence Force has two equally important responsibilities. One is the capacity to act regionally in the interests of peace and stability. This has been a fundamental part of Australia's security agenda in recent years, exemplified by interventions in East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands. The change some years ago heralded a more assertive strategic posture after a long period of what I might describe as benign abstinence by successive Australian governments.

The other responsibility is the ongoing need to join in coalition operations in different parts of the world when Australia's national interests are at stake. Like other nations, Australia has had to navigate new and diverse security challenges in the last decade – especially in the five years since the attacks of 11 September 2001. The threat of Islamist terrorism has transformed the global security agenda. Because the nature of the threat is new and different, so it has demanded new and different attitudes about steps we must take to keep Australia secure.

## Goodbye geographic determinism

A complex and overlapping set of global, regional and domestic security issues has been the hallmark of a more turbulent security environment – at least compared with what John Lewis Gaddis called the 'long peace' of the Cold War. It is an environment where attempts to shoe-horn Australia's national security agenda into a form of geographic determinism are even less relevant than in the past.

A defining feature of Australia's security environment is the growing link between global and regional security challenges. We observe this on a daily basis – in combating terrorism and trans-national crime, countering weapons proliferation, supporting fragile states or responding to economic, environmental and energy security challenges. With the shift in economic and increasingly geo-political weight towards Asia, this intersection of global and regional security challenges will only become more crowded. Demands for Australia to engage in a clear-sighted, highly-integrated and well-resourced strategy of global and regional activism will only intensify.

A direct attack on Australia by a conventional state entity, while it cannot be ruled out entirely, appears a remote possibility for the foreseeable future. The most immediate security threats to Australia in 2006 come from the interlocking networks of terror, arms proliferation and fundamentalist ideology. The struggle against Islamist terrorism and violent extremism will be a generational one. While its crucible is in the Middle East, it is a struggle that has already recast the global security environment in deep and lasting ways. The best answer to terror and extremism is to help people, especially in the Muslim world, who are struggling for security, opportunity and hope. When free societies fail to support others striving for what we have, we do not simply fail them. We fail ourselves.

For Australia, Iraq and Afghanistan are both vital battlegrounds in the fight against terrorism. Australia's engagement in these theatres – and in the Middle East more generally – is important in protecting our interests and keeping Australia secure. Australian forces are in southern Iraq helping to secure the foundations of a viable, democratic future. The handing back of Al Muthanna province to Iraqi security forces in July this year was due in no small measure to the courage and hard work of the Australian Defence Force.

In Afghanistan, more than 500 Australian troops are currently helping that country meet its difficult security

challenges. These are both dangerous missions and the path to security in Iraq and Afghanistan will be long and hard. The level of insurgent and sectarian violence in Iraq remains very high and the Iraqi Government faces many difficult challenges to secure the country's democratic transition and development.

In Afghanistan, the level of violence, including suicide bombings, has increased significantly in recent months as the Taliban and other terrorist groups seek to destroy the credibility of the Afghan Government. The international community must continue to support these fledgling democracies because the implications of failure for the global security environment are enormous.

## A lasting peace in the Middle East

Amongst the lessons of the 11 September 2001 attacks was the danger of a turning a blind eye to states wracked by extremism, fundamentalism and chaos. The aftermath of the war in Lebanon also demands that all nations refocus on the two essential conditions for any lasting peace in the Middle East.

The first is that there must be an unconditional acceptance throughout the entire Arab world, without exception, of Israel's right to exist in peace and security behind internationally recognised borders. The entire Arab world – including Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, and in addition Iran – must give up forever the idea that the Israelis can be driven into the sea.

The second condition is that there has to be an equally unconditional acceptance, including on the part of Israel, of the need for a just settlement with the Palestinian people through the establishment of a viable and independent Palestinian state. Until those two conditions are met, the legitimate hopes for peace and security in the Middle East will remain unrealised and the running sore of the Palestinian issue used vociferously as a recruiting weapon by extremists.

## Countering terrorism

Co-operation among nation-states is still the best defence against terrorism. Together with our active role in global and regional institutions, Australia has forged a network of 12 bilateral counter-terrorism agreements – stretching from Afghanistan to Fiji. Working with partners in South East Asia to help reduce the risk of terrorism is an abiding priority. Like other liberal democracies, we have also taken steps to better secure the home front against terrorism.

Timely and good intelligence is still the best protection against terrorism. In the case of terrorism, protection is not only better than cure. There is no cure from a successful terrorist attack – only mitigation of pain and suffering. All our actions are based on the premise that Australia will remain a terrorist target in the years to come. We can expect that Al Qa'eda and its fellow travellers, especially in South East Asia, will be persistent and adaptable, probing our security processes for any weakness.

## Countering proliferation

Countering the proliferation of weapons also demands an integrated mix of global and regional activism. With practical measures such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), we are helping to disrupt trade in weapons, materials and technologies while also working to reinforce multilateral export controls and safeguards. Australia is heavily engaged in supporting international efforts to address the nuclear brinkmanship of Iran and North Korea.

Iran's behaviour – in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1696 – needs to be met with resolve by the international community. While Australia is committed to finding a diplomatic solution, the UN needs to act quickly and decisively to ensure its own credibility. The challenge of helping weak and fragile states achieve security and development is related to almost every threat we face in this globalised security environment. Again, contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan reflect Australia's appreciation that our interests and responsibilities are both global and regional.

## Assisting our neighbours

Australia has a particular responsibility to assist vulnerable states in our region that confront challenges of law and order, corruption and weak governance. In East Timor and in a number of island States in the Pacific, we have been prepared to act in a robust, hands-on way. Though not without tensions at times, on the whole, our strong engagement is welcomed by neighbouring peoples.

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Australia will continue to shoulder the lion's share of external assistance to some States. At the same time, we are under no illusions that their ultimate destiny lies in their own hands. This perspective underpins the work of the Australian Defence Force, as well as Australian police, diplomats, aid workers and others drawn from various Australian Government agencies working on the ground.

## Working together not alone

Clearly Australia's most immediate interests and responsibilities lie in Asia and the Pacific, for reasons of geography but also given the region's growing power and importance. Strength through co-operation will remain central to how Australia pursues its regional security interests. With a balance of principle and pragmatism, we seek to engage most substantially with those countries with which our primary strategic and economic interests reside.

Australia's alliance relationship with the United States – an alliance of both interests and values – remains a cornerstone of our security. For the foreseeable future, no other country in the world will have the spread of interests or strategic reach of the United States. Steps taken to strengthen our alliance in the last decade reflect Australia's view that none of the security challenges we face can be met without American power and American purpose.

Australia has also encouraged Japan to play a greater security role regionally and globally. This year's Trilateral Strategic Dialogue between Japan, Australia and the United States has added a new dimension to our relationship. As well as working with Japanese forces in Iraq, Australia has continued to support Japan taking a permanent seat on an expanded UN Security Council – as recognition of a more confident country assuming its rightful place, not only in the region, but in the world.

The Australian Government as you know has also raised significantly our level of strategic engagement with both China and India. China is determined to reclaim its place in the global system and should be further encouraged to play a constructive role in the region, including as a crucial partner in efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Australia seeks a strong partnership with China by building on our shared interests while dealing openly and honestly on issues where we might disagree.

By any standard, India is emerging as a major regional and global power. With among the world's largest armed forces, the largest navy in the Indian Ocean and a nuclear weapons capability, it will exert greater influence on our security environment. Australia's relationship with Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation and now its third-largest democracy, is in the centre of Australia's security agenda in South East Asia, not least in the fight against terrorism.

The transformation of Indonesia after decades of authoritarianism is a remarkable political achievement, too little remarked and acknowledged in many part of the world. As a neighbour and friend, Australia will continue to place the highest priority on supporting the efforts of President Yudhoyono to strengthen Indonesia's democratic processes and economic development.

## Rebuilding the ADF

Today's complex and interrelated security challenges have placed new demands on Australia's resources and security capabilities. The Government's long-term commitment to a three per cent real growth per year in defence spending will see Australia's defence budget rise to about \$A26 billion by 2015-16. This will ensure a more combat-focused, better-equipped and more operationally-ready defence force. The Government's recent decision to increase the size of the Army by two battalions is designed to meet future regional and global security challenges. Recent events in East Timor and the Solomon Islands have again shown the sorts of demands which our regional security environment places on Australia.

The expansion of the Army will better enable our troops to sustain operations and to rotate forces so as to be better prepared for future requirements. It will ensure our soldiers are better supported and, when they get home, better rested and prepared to meet future challenges. This increase in the size of the Army is in addition to the enhanced land force capability announced last year as part of the Hardened-and-Networked Army initiative. It reflects this Government's fundamental reassertion of the strategic importance of the Army – and indeed of the individual soldier – in Australia's strategic culture.

The Australian Government has also invested heavily in our broader defence capability for the years ahead. This year's Budget provided for enhanced heavy airlift capacity and planned investments will fund vital projects such as new air combat capability, Air Warfare Destroyers and Abrams tanks, the first of which were delivered in mid September. Australia must maintain a high level of operational capacity, not just with our military but also with our policing capacity. The recent decision to increase the International Deployment Group of the Australian Federal Police by some 400 personnel will provide extra capacity to undertake stability operations and to respond at a moments notice to emerging law and order issues.

Beyond peace enforcement, Australia's leadership role also extends to helping our friends and neighbours in times of natural disaster and humanitarian crisis. This is an area where the courage, resilience and compassion of Australian forces have shone through in recent years – especially in the wake of the 2004 Asian Tsunami and last year's devastating earthquake in Pakistan.

## National security begins at home

In the 21st Century national security begins at home in more ways than one. Not least, it begins with a strong and growing economy so that we can afford to address the whole gamut of our security challenges. Australia's sustained prosperity – an economy now in the 16th year of economic growth – has provided the essential capacity to expand the resources we devote to national security, when and where they are needed.

In addition to greater defence spending, since 11 September 2001 we have committed over \$A8.3 billion to

improving a wide range of domestic security capabilities, including intelligence, law enforcement, border security and protection of transport and other infrastructure. Funding for our domestic intelligence service – the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation – has increased substantially to the point where it is now better resourced than at any time since the height of the Cold War.

The Commonwealth Government continues to work with state and territory governments across Australia to ensure that counter-terrorism laws strike the right balance between protecting individual rights and freedoms, and the right of the community to be safe from a terrorist attack. The recent aviation bomb plot in Great Britain has reminded all of us of the need for vigilance and to constantly evaluate our security procedures. Like all Western liberal democracies, we need to provide security without compromising our values and our way of life, but also remembering that the greatest human right of all is the right to live.

When people talk about civil liberties, they sometimes forget that action taken to protect the citizen against physical violence and attack is a blow in favour, and not a blow against, civil liberties. The battle against Islamist extremism in Australia will only be won with a strong combination of accurate intelligence, effective law enforcement and, crucially, a commitment to certain shared values across the whole of our society. Liberal democracies around the world are having to face challenges at the point where questions of citizenship, immigration, culture and national security intersect – what the British writer, David Goodhart, has labelled ‘security-and-identity issues’.

The maintenance of social cohesion in Australia is both our greatest national achievement and our greatest national challenge for the future. We rightly celebrate our cultural diversity – but this must never be at the expense of the greater importance we attach to the common values that bind us together as one people.

## How we see ourselves

In the end, what links the different strands of Australia’s security agenda is not how we see others but how we see ourselves. Today’s globalised security environment, while it may have shaken some old prisms and paradigms, has also brought into sharper focus enduring interests and values that have served Australia well in the past. In the teeth of battle, in the cause of peace and in face of human suffering, a distinctly Australian blend of realism and idealism has come into its own.

The Government is under no illusions that there are those who want to harm our country and its people. We do not underestimate the strategic challenges that confront us and the tests we will likely face in the future. So while I am confident that our future security agenda will become no less complex and crowded than it is in 2006, I am also very confident that Australia can prevail and prosper. ♦

*John Howard is the Prime-Minister of Australia. This article is based on his address to the Global Forces 2006 conference conducted in Canberra by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on 26-27 September 2006.*

## Conference Calendar

**ADA members and other Defender readers may be interested in the following public conferences and activities:**

- **New Zealand Defence Industry Association Forum 2006**  
*Industry Supporting Defence*  
17-18 October 2006  
Te Papa (National Museum of NZ), Wellington, New Zealand  
Enquiries: (64)(9) 426-3728, david.withy@xtra.co.nz or www.nzdia.co.nz
- **Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers Conference 2006**  
*Intelligence: Current State, Future State*  
17-19 October 2006  
Sofitel Hotel, Brisbane  
Enquiries: conference@aipio.asn.au
- **Defence Force Airshow 2006**  
21-22 October 2006  
RAAF Base Richmond, New South Wales  
Enquiries: (02) 4587-2956 or raaf.gov.au/airshow
- **DSTO Land Warfare Conference 2006**  
*Urbanisation, Complexity, Lethality: Meeting the Challenge for the Land Force*  
24-27 October 2006  
Brisbane Conference and Exhibition Centre  
Enquiries: (08) 8259-5455, LWCC@dsto.defence.gov.au or www.dsto.defence.gov.au/corporate/conferences/landwarfare
- **Kokoda Foundation Seminar-Dinner**  
*Future Challenges for the Australia - United States Strategic Relationship*  
7PM, Thursday, 02 November 2006  
Old Parliament House, Canberra  
Enquiries: (02) 6161-9000 or manager@kokodafoundation.org
- **Submarine Institute of Australia Conference 2006**  
*The Key Challenges in Achieving An Underwater Warfare Capability to Meet Australia's Needs in the Period 2020 to 2050*  
08-09 November 2006  
Telstra Theatre, Australian War Memorial, Canberra  
Enquiries: (02) 6162-4340, conferences@submarineinstitute.com or www.submarineinstitute.com/?doc=93
- **Chief of Air Force Conference 2007**  
*Smaller Air Forces and the Future of Air Power*  
19 March 2006  
Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre  
Enquiries: (02) 6266-1355 or www.raaf.gov.au/airpower
- **Australian International Airshow 2007**  
*Breaking the Barriers*  
20-25 March 2007  
Avalon Airport, Victoria  
Enquiries: (03) 5282-0500, expo@airshow.net.au or www.airshow.net.au