

Marrickville Peace Group

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Submission to the Defence Strategic Review, 2022

1. Introduction

The Marrickville Peace Group welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Defence Strategic Review.

The stated objective of the Review is primarily restricted to helping Defence "to better understand where it should prioritise investment" in order to "ensure the Australian Defence Force is well positioned to meet the nation's security challenges through to 2033 and beyond."¹ The Terms of Reference appear to be based on Australia's current defence posture which pre-supposes the legitimacy of the Australia/US alliance and the strategy of containing China.

In contrast, by focusing on "the future strategic challenges facing Australia"², this submission fundamentally argues that Australia should develop an independent defence and security policy freed from the restrictions imposed by the asymmetrical Australia/US alliance. It also argues that Australia needs to be more responsive to the existential threats of nuclear war and catastrophic climate change if we are to make a lasting contribution, in particular, to peace and stability within the Asia-Pacific region.

Such an account of Australia's future strategic challenges will have a significant impact on Australia's security infrastructure and preparedness required by 2032-33. The submission provides examples of what these should be in contrast to current defence infrastructure and security investment commitments and priorities.

2 Different Strategic Circumstances

As stated in the Terms of Reference, the last Defence Force Posture Review was "undertaken in 2012 in strategic circumstances far different to those facing the Australian nation today".³ While this is undoubtedly the case, the main, but unwritten, difference is that China is now viewed as a potential adversary.

This is partly due to China's extraordinary rise as an economic and military power. But, to some extent, it is also a consequence of decisions and actions taken by Australia itself during this period. In particular, Australia has continually shown itself to be a firm ally of the USA, despite that nation's hostility towards China (which it now sees as a rival) and despite its trade relationship with China.

By supporting the USA in its 'pivot to the Asia-Pacific' and allowing US marines to be stationed in Darwin (under an agreement lasting 25 years), Australia has announced to the world at large (and China in particular) that it takes sides with the USA. The

previous Minister for Defence's statement that it would be 'inconceivable' for Australia not to join the USA, should it go to war with China over Taiwan, made the position abundantly clear.

That Australia has maintained naval and RAAF activity in the South China Sea for no discernible, legitimately 'defensive' reasons, is further evidence of a general, national hostility towards China. The latest development in this process has been the AUKUS pact which many respected thinkers see as being directed against China.

In the light of all this, it is little wonder that China now perceives Australia to be less than friendly. The relationship has been allowed to deteriorate to such a level that open discussion of the possibility of war between the USA and China, in which Australia is expected to side with the USA, is taking place.

In terms of Australia's defence force posture, a very high priority should be given to improving relations between Australia and China. It is therefore recommended that naval and RAAF operations in the South China Sea cease immediately.

It is further recommended that the agreement with the USA for the stationing of US marines in Darwin should be re-visited and terminated as soon as practicable.

These moves would send the message that needs to be sent - that Australia has no aggressive, military ambitions whatsoever, where China is concerned.

3 AUKUS

There are already a number of problems with the AUKUS agreement:

1. Without question, it has served to worsen relations between Australia and China, evidenced by China's objection to the IAEA's report.⁴
2. It has served to worsen relations between Australia and neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia.^{5, 6}
3. It has served to worsen relations with the Pacific Island community, which has suffered and is suffering the long-term effects of nuclear weapons development.⁷
4. It draws Australia into the 'nuclear club'. This has emboldened those who favour Australia's adoption of a nuclear industry, despite this being rejected by Australia since 1998.⁸
5. It has led some to conclude that it is one more step in the build-up of American military might in Northern Australia.⁹

In short, so far from helping to 'sustain peace and stability' in the region (as promoted in the statement released on September 16, 2021¹⁰), AUKUS brings Australia and the region closer to the highly undesirable situation of open conflict.

There are numerous, well-documented concerns over the proposed acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). If they are acquired, they:

1. Would very likely set a precedent that other countries may follow, contrary to the spirit of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)¹¹.

2. Are not as well-suited to Australia's territorial defence as conventional submarines (which is another reason for China's distrust of AUKUS)¹².
3. Would be hard for Australia to man, the RAN lacking sufficient experience and trained personnel.¹³
4. Require new bases designed and built to support them. A fact that has already generated community opposition¹⁴.
5. Can probably not be supplied by the USA or the UK or be built in Australia before the 2040's¹⁵.

In addition, there exists the apprehension that AUKUS and the acquisition of SSN's hand effective control of some military assets to either the USA or the UK, suggesting a significant loss of military independence and national sovereignty. Many authors have made similar comments, notably Hugh White in his Quarterly Essay of 'Sleepwalk to War'¹⁶, Clinton Fernandes in his book *Sub-imperial Power*¹⁷, and ex-PM Paul Keating in a recent on-line discussion with Prof. James Curran in La Trobe University's 'Ideas and Society' program.¹⁸

For these reasons it is recommended that the AUKUS project be abandoned.

4 An Alternative Military Posture

Defence policy expert, Mike Gilligan, argues that recent developments in the implementation of military strategy suggest that the projection of power in distant arenas has taken precedence over the actual defence of Australian territory¹⁹. This is in contrast to the essentially defensive nature of Australia's posture as it was outlined in the 1976 Defence White Paper.

An alternative posture has been advocated by Dr Albert Palazzo of the Australian Army research Centre.

Dr Palazzo argues that "the Australian people have always lived in fear of invasion, no matter how unjustified, and see themselves as geographic outsiders. Australia also has never identified with a particular military philosophy; instead, it aligns with a great power protector. Australia's defence force is designed to embed itself within its partner's way of war. This means Australia, a natural Strategic Defensive state, mirrors in miniature a Strategic Offensive state. The result is incoherence in Australian Defence policy."²⁰

Considering the relative size of the ADF (when compared with the forces of major powers) and taking into account Australia's geography, Dr Palazzo advocates a new and more coherent, military philosophy. He sees the acquisition of large and expensive Air Force and Naval platforms as unwise, because of their vulnerability to modern technological weaponry. He suggests that the changes in technology now favour defensive, over offensive, military operations and urges Australia to adopt a truly defensive stance.

He concluded his talk at 'Raising Peace' by saying "The Strategic Defensive offers Australia the best option it has for survival in what is expected to be an increasingly dangerous world. It is not a call to embrace passivity or neutrality, nor to seek out opportunities for violence and aggression, but rather to acquire awareness and strength."

More details can be found in Dr Palazzo's paper "Planning not to Lose"²¹.

It is recommended that Australia re-consider the idea of 'power projection' and revert to a truly defensive posture.

5 Security Threats

Australia, by virtue of its geography, is an inherently safe place. Whilst (in a war scenario) sea-born trade might be severely disrupted, there is no reason to believe that the territorial integrity of nation itself might be threatened. Australia has the resources of an entire continent at the disposal of its people, under the supervision of a single government. Any malevolent power wanting to dominate Australia by military means would face overwhelming logistical problems, in that all its military materiel would need to be transported across water. Even if faced with a successful blockade, Australia could remain safe and secure.

For this reason it is recommended (again) that Australia adopt a strictly defensive, military posture.

However, whilst there is no foreseeable military threat to Australia's essential security, there are very serious threats to global as well as local security that do not receive the attention they deserve.

5.1 The Climate Crisis

Along with every other nation on Earth, Australia is faced with the 'hyperthreat' of global warming and the associated ecological and societal chaos that it will probably bring. It is not even possible to know what form the hyperthreat will take. What is clear is that no military response has any likelihood of success. Whilst the crisis may well increase the risk of military conflicts, Australia should keep itself detached and resist the temptation to join them. Indeed, military activity can do little more than contribute to the problems of the climate crisis - in two ways. It does so directly, through the excessive CO₂ emissions associated with all military activity. It also contributes indirectly, by damaging and/or destroying international relationships. A military-style response is likely to contribute to the problem, rather than resolve it.

For example, the damage to Australia's relationship with China has already been mentioned. Whilst that relationship remains strained, the possibility for international co-operation, on the enormous problems that the climate crisis is bringing, is lost. Such co-operation is desperately and urgently needed, but it will not come so long as nations threaten to engage one another in conflict.

Being as safe as it is, Australia need be the enemy of no country. It should be the friend of all.

Thus far, we have only felt the first, little ripples of the climate crisis. As it deepens and those ripples become waves, being prepared for immense upheavals and destruction will become much more important than being prepared for some imagined armed invasion by a foreign nation.

For the present, governmental concerns about 'national security' are almost exclusively focused on military defence. Community concerns are ahead of the government in this

regard. This state of affairs will change as circumstances change and the crisis deepens. In preserving national security, the ADF may have a far less significant role to play than some future Emergency Response Force, such as has been suggested by Sir Peter Cosgrove²².

In a persuasive paper on this topic, Dr Elizabeth Boulton has argued that traditional top-down approaches to addressing the climate crisis will not succeed and that a 'bottom-up' process is needed. She advocates a 'Plan E', which is "... civilian led and involves civilian mobilization, which is distinct from militarization. Military forces would be partially reconfigured as part of this strategic realignment and will form a portion of larger hyper-response forces (HRF)."²³ The concurrence of Cosgrove's and Bouton's ideas is striking.

5.2 The Danger of Nuclear Conflict

Despite its apparent willingness to embrace nuclear technology under AUKUS, Australia is not armed with nuclear weapons so is not poised to join any nuclear conflict. However, any outbreak of such a conflict would be bound to have deep implications for the nation. The current, high level of tensions, brought about by the conflict in Ukraine, have brought the possibility of such conflict closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Australia should give priority to supporting diplomatic efforts to restore peace in Ukraine. This source of the tension, that could lead to nuclear war, must be resolved. Peace in the region must be re-established. This can only be done through diplomatic negotiations.

The very existence of nuclear weapons places the entire world at risk. Australia should join existing moves to eliminate all nuclear weapons. Australia's reluctance to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is at variance with its obligations as signatory to the Treaty of Rarotonga, the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.²⁴ The TPNW already has legal validity. Australia's willingness to provide facilities for US and UK nuclear submarines (which may or may not carry nuclear weapons) may place it in breach.

It is recommended that Australia signs and ratifies the TPNW.

6 Concluding Remarks

The traditional role of the ADF needs critical re-examination. It is no longer appropriate or desirable that Australia look to and rely upon a distant ally, however powerful that ally may be (or may have been). Claims of past friendship and 'shared values' must give way to a cold assessment of national interests. It is time to break the old pattern of reliance. Australia is well capable of standing on its own feet and defending itself (in the true meaning of the word). It need no longer stand in fear of invasion. It is very safe.

As ex-PM Paul Keating has often remarked, Australia should find its security within Asia, rather than through the assistance of distant foreign empires.

A shift in emphasis towards a posture of Strategic Defence is needed and recommended.

To defend itself, Australia does not need enormously expensive military platforms, such as nuclear-powered submarines. For its defence, Australia simply needs to make attacking the continent prohibitively expensive to any would-be aggressor.

The greatest threats to national security comes not from any immediate risk of a military attack, but from the coming climate crisis and the possibility of nuclear war. These threats require a re-think of priorities, with emphasis shifting away from military thinking. Addressing the climate crisis would include equipping civilian communities with the capacity to respond at a local level, while addressing the nuclear threat would include Australia signing and ratifying the TPNW.

7 Recommendations

It is recommended that Australia:

1. Makes strenuous efforts to improve relations with China;
2. Ceases RAN and RAAF operations in the South China Sea;
3. Terminates the agreement under which US marines are rotated through Darwin;
4. Abandons the AUKUS project;
5. Rejects 'power projection' and adopts a military posture of Strategic Defence;
6. Prepares for a non-military response to the climate crisis, and
7. Signs and ratifies the TPNW.

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