

TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL SECURITY FOR AUSTRALIA **DEFINING THE ENDS, CONSIDERING THE WAYS, PROVIDING THE MEANS**

Urgent action is required

Public debate and discussion on critical security issues facing the Australian people is required urgently.

Civil society needs to step-up to encourage and assist the Australian Government to prepare a comprehensive national security policy and an accompanying comprehensive national security strategy. Australia's future depends on it. The Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF) has been established to contribute positively to this important endeavour. The APSF's objectives are at Attachment A.

Assuring the security and future wellbeing of Australians and our environment is the most important and critical function of the Australian Government. People cannot enjoy security and wellbeing in the absence of peace. Peace is fragile and means more than the absence of war. As Albert Einstein reminded us, peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding. War destroys and disrupts, but peace restores, builds and strengthens us as individuals, as communities, and as nations. But peace and security cannot be for some at the expense of others. An enforced peace is unstable and unsustainable. We cannot be secure in the longer term if others are not secure. Accordingly, Australia urgently requires a comprehensive national security policy and implementing strategy that is centred on peace, the wellbeing of our people and the stability and sustainability of our environment and planet.

Pillars of comprehensive security

'National security' is a broad term that conveys different meanings. The term is frequently used loosely by governments to justify decisions taken, often in the absence of adequate public consultation and explanation. AUKUS is one such example.

In Australia today 'national security' is too often taken to primarily mean 'military security', or protection from unsubstantiated military threats. Fundamentally, however, national security relates to Australia's survival and the conditions of existence for our people.¹ It is human-centred in that the preservation of the nation state – particularly in democracies – rests ultimately on the freedom and wellbeing of our citizens. Freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom from war/conflict. Human security should have primacy.²

¹ Barry Buzan, 'New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century', *International Affairs*, Vol.67, No.3, July 1991

² Human rights and human security are complementary. They occupy the same normative space as each other and other concepts such as Roosevelt's four freedoms and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each comes to this normative space from a different angle. Human security is particularly interesting as it was developed by two Asian intellectuals (Madam Ogata and Amartya Sen) steeped in their own culture and fully cognizant of western values. SDGs are valuable in setting goals to be achieved by all nations and for all peoples.

‘National security’ also differs from ‘national interest’, although the two are often used synonymously. While a particular ‘interest’ may be perceived as important or beneficial, it does not impact directly on Australia’s survival and the wellbeing of our people. It is not uncommon for governments to confuse these terms. For example, Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were all justified on the premise of national security. But history proved that Australia’s survival was never threatened by our defeat and withdrawal from these wars. Similarly, assertions by government that our failure to export fossil fuel gas to Japan and South Korea would jeopardise the national security of all three countries is imprecise and misleading. In such instances successive Australian governments acted in what they perceived to be our national interest, yet none of those situations threatened our national security.

It should also be noted that nations may have, or at least feel they have, competing interests and unequal benefits. National leaders may see it in the national interest to preserve these unequal benefits indefinitely – something that is unsustainable in the longer term and a threat to national security in its various forms.

A further distinction can be drawn between ‘security’ and ‘safety’. Improving safety is about protection from threats. Improving security is about removing or minimising threats and managing risks, thereby fostering confidence and trust in the Australian Government.

Most definitions of ‘nation’ focus on people: people with commonalities (such as geography, ancestry, tradition, language) operating under collective governance. In this sense, the security of a nation state cannot be separated from the security of its people. Comprehensive national security, therefore, necessarily encompasses peacebuilding and reconciliation, political stability, economic progress and equality, science and technological prowess, social justice and harmony, and environmental sustainability. Military preparedness is very important, but it represents only one pillar of national security and must be balanced with and against other pillars.

Some Western countries have articulated their approach to national security through the traditional ‘DIME’ acronym, using the four pillars of Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economics. This is a useful approach, but it fails to acknowledge other important factors such as political stability, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, social harmony, environmental security, health and technological prowess. As a developed country not directly threatened militarily by any adversary, Australia has an opportunity to set achievable and more comprehensive milestones to enhance its own security and provide an example for other countries to consider.

In developing a comprehensive national security policy and an implementing strategy the APSF encourages the Australian Government to consider the following cross-cutting security pillars:

- **Political security:** the future stability of Australia depends on the calibre and wisdom of its political leaders to make decisions and enact legislation in the best interests of the people they have been elected to represent. This requires trust, transparency, integrity and accountability. Without stable, capable and democratic political

leadership, supported by strong institutions, the future security of Australia is at great risk. Our politicians must recognize that it is the people's power they seek to be entrusted – competing on the basis of the ways they will exercise that power for the security and benefit of our people and the peoples with whom we seek to live in peace. For those who seek to win by other means, our institutions should make the risk of lying or misleading too risky and ensure that elections cannot be bought.

- **Human security:** human security focuses on a people-centred and multi-disciplinary understanding of security. It is concerned with protecting individuals and communities from various threats, including violence, crime, pandemics, and environmental hazards. Prioritising human security better ensures the wellbeing and dignity of all Australians. It is integral to ensuring peace and security in Australia, but is seldom acknowledged in government security circles. By addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals and communities, Australia can enhance resilience and stability, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts and crises. By mastering human security at home we can share our experience abroad. The Australian Defence Force and the Defence Organisation can make an important contribution to human security.
- **Climate security:** human-induced climate disruption is a unique threat to the world because it is fundamental to all Earth systems, comprehensively dangerous, rapid, self-reinforcing, has long-term consequences and, for many effects including some already underway, irreversible. Recognising the impacts of climate disruption as a security threat, Australia can address environmental and ecological challenges such as extreme weather events, resource scarcity and displacement of populations. Within Australia climate disruption impacts negatively on the national economy and the wellbeing of Australians. The frequency and intensity of natural disasters is increasing, both at home and abroad, requiring greater attention by governments and local communities.
- **Economic security:** Australia's economic prosperity and equality of opportunity is intertwined with its security. This involves promoting trade, investment, and innovation while mitigating vulnerabilities to economic shocks and disruptions. Self-sufficiency, stockpiling and supply chains need to be optimised and, where necessary, premiums paid to assure survival. Military actions that jeopardise our supply chains and our economic security must be avoided unless such actions are vital to ensure our national security.
- **Diplomatic security:** effective diplomacy is essential for managing regional and global tensions, fostering alliances and partnerships, and promoting Australia's interests in bilateral and multinational forums. Numerous studies have highlighted Australia's diplomatic deficit over the past 20 years. This needs to be redressed as a matter of urgency. Compared to the acquisition of expensive defence platforms, diplomacy is a cost-effective force multiplier. By asserting its independence and focusing on key security issues – such as the international rule of law and acceptance of the jurisdiction of the ICJ and ICC, nuclear non-proliferation, arms control mechanisms, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, sustainable development, human

rights, refugee and displacement solutions, and the control of generative artificial intelligence (AI) – Australia can have considerable influence and impact.

- **Defence/Military Security:** while important, military security represents just one aspect of Australia’s national security. Capable military forces, robust intelligence capabilities and strategic defence alliances and partnerships are very important, but structures and capabilities need to be determined for the primary purpose of defending Australia and protecting our people. Effective counter-terrorist capabilities are essential. With a relatively small population we must rely on modern science and technology for our small regular forces, but we must also have a mobilisation plan in the event of a foreign attack in our region. We should focus primarily on the defence of our territory and its approaches. Involvement on distant battlefields and oceans where we are unable to determine the outcome should be avoided. We must not become too reliant on allies for the defence of our country, or attract adversaries as a consequence.
- **Cyber security:** in the digital age, protecting critical infrastructure, data, and information systems is paramount. Cyber security measures are essential to safeguard against cyber threats and attacks. Effective cyber security is a high priority for Australia, not least because cyber attack could penetrate the machinery of government, crippling strategic decision-making and our economy. Australia must be careful not to become too reliant on foreign powers for cyber security, even close allies.
- **Health security:** health security is vital for all citizens who should have access to the care that can make their lives longer and more fulfilling. But our health security is intertwined with those of other countries given the speed with which diseases and pandemics can spread rapidly in our globalized world.

Considered together, these pillars help measure Australia’s resilience against challenges to its peace and security. Because resources are limited, trade-offs and prioritisation of effort and funding will be required to optimise Australia’s peace and security outcomes.

Unlike many other countries, successive Australian governments since 2013 have decided not to produce a National Security Strategy.³ Yet, during the same period, numerous significant decisions have been taken and legislated on the premise of strengthening Australia’s national security. Many of these decisions have been made without sufficient public consultation, and some decisions (such as AUKUS) have been kept secret from the Australian Parliament and people.

At least since commencement of the ill-fated ‘war on terror’ in 2001, successive Australian governments have placed far too much emphasis on the military pillar of national security – an over emphasis that has weakened our long-term security. At the same time, political

³ *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security*, Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22library/lcatalog/00500351%22>

advisors and corporate lobbyists have become branded with the twin title of ‘national security and defence’, further strengthening the perception that both are inextricably linked and preeminent to the other security pillars. This narrow focus has excluded sufficient consideration of the other pillars essential to sustaining Australia’s peace, economic prosperity and social wellbeing. Our prime security focus has been to align with the United States militarily and diplomatically, first in the ‘war on terror’ and now in containing and contesting the rise of China. As a result, Australia’s independent position and priority on other key security pillars has diminished. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to address Australia’s national security preparedness is needed urgently.

Australia’s current focus on the acquisition of offensive and exorbitantly expensive long-range military capabilities, principally to support the United States in its effort to contain China, is fatally flawed. This strategy jeopardises prospects for peace in our immediate neighbourhood and makes Australians less secure at home. To better protect Australians and assure national sovereignty, affordable military capabilities are required that complement resource commitments to other national security priorities. These military capabilities must be non-offensive to other countries, but clearly demonstrate the depth of defence that any aggressor would face in the unlikely event that Australia is threatened militarily. Australia’s current defence strategy of denial and deterrence is neither plausible nor measurable. To prevent and better manage conflicts our military must be able to operate collaboratively with allies, neighbours and the United Nations, especially in contributing to peacebuilding, confidence-building measures, and natural disasters, and particularly in the southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia. In the current global context of multi-faceted and rapidly increasing major security issues, such as climate disruption and the threat of nuclear war, Australia must think carefully about broader security priorities before being drawn into distant (and expensive) conflicts that present no direct threat to our sovereignty and have a doubtful chance of victory.

In developing Australia’s comprehensive national security approach, the government must seek and reflect the views and priorities of the Australian people, including our First Nations people. Security priorities and expenditure must be determined following robust, ongoing and transparent public discussion that ensures broad-based input. We must also recognise that our security is stronger if the security of others is strengthened – something that is obvious in climate, economic and health security. It is also very important for political security that Australia does not interfere with competing political factions by supporting coups, corruption and international tax avoidance. Just as the domestic rule of law must be based on the laws applying to all, so it must be with international law.

Ends, ways and means

A disciplined and inclusive approach is required to develop and implement a comprehensive national security policy and implementing strategy for Australia. The policy and strategy

must specify measurable outcomes and be achievable within realistic timeframes and resource allocations.

The world is changing evermore rapidly driven by technology, climate disruption and the changing geopolitical balance of power. This necessitates regular detailed reviews of Australia's security policy and legislation, including in the first months after a change of government. Given the broad scope of a comprehensive national security policy, this work should have oversight within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and report to a National Security Advisor directly answerable to the Prime Minister. Consideration should be given to establishing a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Peace and Security, beyond that of the work currently undertaken by the current separate joint committees of Intelligence and Security and Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Civil society organisations and institutes specialising in peace and security issues should be encouraged, consulted and supported by the Australian Government.

Australia's national security policy should succinctly define the 'ends' to be achieved. Our national security strategy should elaborate the 'ways' by which these 'ends' can best be achieved, and allocate the 'means' required.

A comprehensive national security policy – the 'ends'

An ultimate 'end' for Australia's security efforts must be the maintenance of peace at home and our contribution to the achievement of peace regionally and globally. Peace can never be taken for granted at home, and often may be beyond Australia's control abroad. Nevertheless, all actions and resources should be measured against this achievement, and the security pillars balanced and resourced to achieve this. Assuring peace and security at home will require having trust and confidence in our government. But peace at home will also be elusive unless and until we are able to close the gap with our First Nations people, ensure justice and human rights for all under our care, address climate disruption and environmental restoration with integrity, prevent and respond effectively to terrorist incidents, and reverse the increasing economic and social inequality gap between rich and poor.

Our contribution to achieving peace and security abroad will be more difficult. With limited resources available we will need to focus more on justice through international law, and less on military alliances. We should only engage in military action if we accept the jurisdiction of ICJ and ICC and are assured that our allies do too. We will need to demonstrate greater independence in decision-making and improve our international reputation, and we must never support or condone breaches of international law. We will need to show greater commitment to peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention, arms control mechanisms, nuclear non-proliferation, climate stabilisation, and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While bilateral relations will remain critical, Australia must reengage more purposefully and show leadership in important multilateral peace and security initiatives, particularly in our immediate region and with and through the United Nations. In taking a seat on the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2025, Australia will have an excellent opportunity to take a lead on critical security issues affecting our region. As a country that is not threatened militarily, and as a country that does not threaten others,

Australia is in an enviable position to contribute significantly to global peace and security challenges. But to do so effectively we will need to exert our independence and discard our fear of abandonment from the United States and the United Kingdom. Our future rests in the Asia-Pacific.

In an increasingly unstable and multipower world impacted by climate disruption, nuclear proliferation and economic uncertainty, Australia's comprehensive national security policy must recognise the intersection of social, economic, environmental, and geopolitical factors. Considerable tension exists between these factors, making it a complex task to determine the best allocation of scarce resources to achieve our 'ends'. Thus, it is important that the policy statement provide a clear vision for Australia's security in addition to the attainment of peace. We need to know where we are headed. What does the achievement of our end goals look like?

The national security values that will guide us must be considered carefully, and clearly stated. These are not in our Constitution and they have never been articulated convincingly. Slogans like 'forward defence', 'continental defence', 'defence of Australia', and 'deterrence and denial' are inadequate descriptors of our national security and focus too heavily on the military dimension. Determining our core values is challenging but essential, and we will need to be courageous in selecting the most important. To be meaningful, these values must be principled and measurable and not emotional or rhetorical. Examples include environmental protection, equality of opportunity, resilience, reconciliation, compassion and preparedness.

Australia's national security policy should also distinguish between threats and risks. Risks can be managed, but threats must be addressed. Risks refer to potential events or circumstances that could negatively impact Australia's security, while threats are deliberate actions or intentions that would cause significant harm. Most important are existential threats. Two of these are the threat of nuclear war and the impact of catastrophic climate disruption, yet neither of these currently receive worthy attention in Australian Government national security circles. A third existential threat is the unregulated consequences from generative AI. Unfortunately, neither AI nor robots can be held accountable for war crimes or crimes against humanity. Accordingly, Australia needs to take action urgently to support international regulation and prohibition of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) that are not dependent on human decision-making. We must recognize that these existential threats are from embedded human-induced errors. The first could destroy our civilisation in a week, the second is happening at increased pace as it affects all Earth systems, and the third risks absolving humankind from self-destruction.

A comprehensive national security strategy – the 'ways' and the 'means'

Australia's national security strategy must specify the ways in which Australia's national security policy will be achieved, and the allocation of resources (means). This is a complex task, but a very necessary one because national security is the most important responsibility of the Australian Government.

The strategy could address each of the security pillars and specify the ‘ways’ and ‘means’ required for each. Responsibilities could be assigned to the Parliament, implementing departments and agencies, and the contributions from civil society identified and resourced.

A number of policies and strategies already exist within the machinery of government that directly impact on Australia’s national security. However, in the absence of a coherent national security policy it is not possible to ascertain their relevance or utility. Defence strategy is well advanced with the government committed to a biennial defence strategic review. For an increasing number of Australians, however, this is of significant concern because the current defence strategy is not linked to, or supportive of, a national security policy. Highly expensive and contentious decisions have already been taken that could unintentionally set Australia on the course to major war from which it would be difficult to withdraw. The consequences for Australia would be horrific.

Conclusion

The Global Peace Index confirms the degradation of peace. Major causes include the geopolitical transition between major powers, increasing violent conflict, faltering global economic circumstances, the impact of climate disruption, pandemics, massive population displacement and persistent poverty. Many of these security determinants are intertwined.

A comprehensive national security policy and strategy for Australia must address a broad spectrum of challenges across the different security pillars. Prioritising human security, distinguishing between key risks and threats, and mitigating existential threats are essential components of Australia’s comprehensive approach to enhancing its security. Too much emphasis is currently given to military security at the expense of other security pillars that would better assure Australia’s security in a rapidly changing world. While alliances like that with the United States have value, Australia must maintain strategic autonomy and pursue a more balanced approach to security cooperation. Priority of effort should address security challenges at home, and then those in our immediate region. Our global focus should be on those issues that promote peace and avoid conflict, largely through adroit bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and with a reinvigorated focus on supporting the United Nations.

In a less peaceful and increasingly uncertain world the Australian Government must urgently fulfil its most important responsibility and work with the Australian people to prepare a coherent and comprehensive national security policy and strategy.

APSF Executive Team
5 April 2024

The Australian Peace and Security Forum

The Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF) is politically non-partisan. It was established in early 2024 to:

- promote public discussion and understanding of the broad array of threats and opportunities that contribute to the collective and individual peace and security of Australians,
- contribute to the development of a comprehensive national security policy and strategy reflecting the key concerns and priorities of the Australian people, and
- provide government with expert civil society perspectives on these areas.

To achieve these goals the APSF will promote public discussion and facilitate informed debate on the broad array of peace and security issues. The APSF will:

- use a variety of communication methods to inform government and the public about the holistic nature of peace and security;
- promote the urgent need for a comprehensive security strategy to build resilience for Australia, including addressing the critical priorities of diplomacy, climate disruption, nuclear non-proliferation, peacebuilding initiatives, achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a capable and affordable fit-for-purpose defence force;
- recommend and contribute to parliamentary inquiries to address comprehensive peace and security issues ahead of the next federal election;
- provide publications, webinars, podcasts, traditional media and social media campaigns, and public events that facilitate increased participation by Australians in developing greater understanding peace and security priorities for Australia;
- liaise with parliamentarians, senior bureaucrats, intelligence officials and DFAT and Defence officials to provide expert advice on peace and security issues;
- collaborate with and encourage civil society organisations and informed individuals to contribute meaningfully to address the spectrum of peace and security challenges; and
- seek to develop benchmarks that measure progress towards Australia achieving critical peace and security goals.