

The case for an Australian national security strategy

by Carl Ungerer

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Introduction

Two and a half years after the first National Security Statement to Parliament, it can be argued that the first wave of national security reforms is over. The key building blocks of a national security ‘community’ have been put in place—including the establishment of the National Security Adviser’s position in the Prime Minister’s department, the National Security College at the Australian National University and stronger coordination mechanisms between and within the intelligence community. By and large, departments have accepted the need for a more ‘joined-up’ approach to national security planning. And the introduction of a coordinated national security budget process, although nascent, suggests the promise of better direction in the overall allocation of resources for the national security community than the departmentally stovepiped approach of the past.

The challenge now is to convert those reforms into a more comprehensive national security system that will endure shifts in both global and domestic security in the years ahead. One such systemic reform would be to elevate the current National Security Statement into a full strategy document, similar to a White Paper. This would be consistent with national security planning in comparable countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands.

This paper examines the arguments for and against the formal introduction of an Australian national security strategy. On balance, we argue that the case for a single strategy document to guide and direct policy is compelling. If done properly, it would serve as a foundation stone for the growing list of issue-specific reviews and policy streams that now constitute the government’s broad (and some would say unwieldy) national security agenda. Done poorly, however, it has the potential to confuse lines of responsibility, complicate resource allocations and make the task of responding to future national security problems more difficult. Accordingly, this paper offers some thoughts on both the conceptual issues that would need to be addressed in framing a national security strategy and the practical steps that would need to be taken in order to achieve that outcome.

Defining the problem

The 2008 National Security Statement to Parliament defined national security as ‘freedom from attack or the threat of attack; the maintenance of our territorial integrity; the maintenance of our political sovereignty; the preservation of our hard won freedoms; and the maintenance of our fundamental capacity to advance economic prosperity for all Australians’.¹

The common thread linking those various elements of the definition together is threat. Security, national or otherwise, is simply the steps taken to reduce or eliminate threats. But which threats are most salient to the security of the Australian nation *as a whole*? The possibility of a conventional war, however remote, is one. National security concepts, therefore, are naturally grounded in the application of military force to defend the country from armed attack. But the government has acknowledged that internal sources of insecurity—natural and man-made—are of growing importance. The evolving character of religious extremism, cybersecurity and espionage represent new and often interrelated challenges to notions of state sovereignty and territorial integrity.

So the government has adopted an ‘all-hazards’ approach to defining national security threats. The theory is the ‘all-hazards’ concept can provide a framework for anticipating and responding to a wider variety of national risks, from terrorist attacks to natural disasters. In the planning and preparation stages, it is true that many responses to these events are similar: emergency services all provide common capabilities regardless of whether the incident is malicious or environmental. And an ‘all-hazards’ approach compels government to think broadly about the nature of the risks and threats that a society is likely to face. It is also driven by a simple cost-benefit analysis—seeking to reduce the duplication of resources and capabilities across multiple agencies makes sense.

Today, planning for national security is no longer based on just one source of threat (nation states) or one type of threat (military conflict) in isolation. Despite the ‘traditional’ language in the government’s definition of states and sovereign threats, the Australian statement went on to identify twenty non-traditional national security ‘issues’—ranging from terrorism to organised crime to climate change—that now influence national security planning.

Increasingly, and in line with debates in other comparable countries, the concept of *national* security encompasses a holistic notion of protecting the state, its people, their values and their way of life from a variety of threats, risks and pressures in the international system. The wide-ranging scope of these ‘societal’ threats, which include everything from infectious diseases to economic vulnerabilities, complicates the ability of governments to articulate a single national security strategy.

For Robert Jervis, these are ‘secondary threats’, and they do not lend themselves to a coherent national security strategy anyway.² Only the existential threat of direct military conflict can deliver the kind of single, comprehensive, integrated national security planning document that is worthy of the name ‘grand’ strategy. At the onset of the Cold War, American strategy had coalesced around the policy of ‘containing’ the Soviet Union and the spread of communism. And the full range of military, intelligence, diplomatic and economic instruments of national power were devoted to achieving that single strategic goal. But, for Australia, no such global, first-order security threat currently exists. So policymakers and military planners must, according to Jervis, ‘concentrate on threats according to some combination of the likelihood that they will materialize and the menace that they will constitute if they do so.’³

Likelihood and consequence are the foundational elements of a national security risk assessment. And some countries, particularly the UK, Canada, Singapore and the Netherlands, have attempted to incorporate risk assessments more closely

into national security planning. Across the spectrum of identified national security ‘risks’, however, the comparison of issues becomes problematic. For example, it is difficult to assess potential military threats (for example, rising naval competition in Asia) against non-military threats (say, infectious diseases). Moreover, issues such as climate change have been co-opted into national security debates without a sufficiently thorough debate about how or when changes in the global environment will constitute a direct threat to national security interests. Ultimately, we have to accept that judgments about both likelihood and consequence will be hostage to some degree of subjectivity.

So defining ‘national security’ in the absence of a first-order threat is a difficult task. And there is no point trying to construct a strategy for a problem that has no agreed meaning. But national security is more than just an esoteric, existentialist idea. For mature democratic states like Australia, there are always complex national security interests at stake. Preserving Australia’s political independence and sovereignty are the most fundamental tasks of government. Beyond these, our security interests encompass:

- the capacity for independent action without foreign interference
- the stability of our immediate geographic neighbourhood
- the maintenance of a rules-based international order
- the safety of Australian citizens, at home and abroad
- the opportunities for economic growth and prosperity.

As its name suggests, a *national* security strategy requires policymakers to think about the range of security problems that could threaten the nation-state as a political entity, and the appropriate prioritisation of responses. But that list cannot be without boundaries. If everything is a national security issue, then nothing is. As ASPI has argued previously, governments will need to adopt specific criteria for deciding which issues are central to national security planning and which are not.⁴ We have suggested that the criteria should include:

- scale—the problem is large enough that it overwhelms local or state government responses, and therefore constitutes a threat to the society as a whole
- proximity—the closeness of the threat to Australia (armed conflict in Burkina Faso does not automatically constitute a national security crisis for Australia. But armed conflict in Papua New Guinea would.)
- urgency – the immediacy and timing of the threat.

In addition to those three criteria, Hugh White⁵ has suggested four more:

- probability—the likelihood of an event occurring relative to others
- seriousness—it poses an existential threat to society
- preparation/resilience—the readiness of the state to deal with crises
- consequences for national identity—how deeply does the issue impinge our sense of identity.

Taken together, this set of criteria offers a basic toolkit for policymakers to cordon off the national security task from other parts of public policy. Only those security problems that have a strong likelihood of threatening the stability of the state should be called national security threats. Many issues that currently consume media attention do not meet this standard. People smuggling and irregular boat arrivals, for example, constitute a difficult policy area for governments, and require the use of both traditional national security agencies (intelligence, diplomatic, defence) and domestic agencies (customs, welfare, education and immigration) to deal with it. But the actions of a small number of individuals seeking to circumvent our border security and immigration laws do not represent an existential threat to the nation.

Intuitively, however, the government has accepted the notion that there is a hierarchy of national security threats ranging from the possibility of conventional or nuclear war between states to terrorism and other transnational crimes. In terms of national security planning, future governments will need to make more explicit the reasoning behind this hierarchy and the implications for national security capability planning and priorities.

There is no doubt that advancing our national security interests will require more than just seeking to prevent military conflict in our region, or beyond. So governments will continue to define national security interests as an assessment of competing (and sometimes interrelated) risks and pressures in the international system. And future governments are unlikely to abandon the 'all-hazards, risk-based' approach of national security planning. So, without the discipline that comes from facing first-order threats, national risk assessments will continue to be the crucial planning element for the development of a national security strategy.

Overall, the main challenge for Australia's national security policy over the next 10–20 years is to avoid a narrowing of our strategic policy choices. Such a narrowing could occur if there was a sharp deterioration in our strategic environment, if direct threats to Australian foreign, defence or economic interests arose in our region, or if Australia was forced to choose sides in an armed conflict between our traditional military allies and our regional economic partners.

Such outcomes are not inevitable. But as recent events have shown, Australia faces a regional security environment that will remain crowded with possibilities and therefore unpredictable. The centripetal forces of global economic integration and closer security cooperation will compete alongside the contradictory forces of nationalism and competition for power and influence among several rising powers, particularly in Asia.

The national interest calculations of countries in the region, particularly the major powers, will have an important influence on the strategic environment in which Australia must operate. But, as a middle power, Australia will have the opportunity to shape regional security outcomes as well.

This analysis leads to several planning assumptions that should guide the development of a national security strategy. First, the current military strategy, as outlined in the 2009 Defence White Paper, of a more robust maritime capability to project force into the region as part of coalition operations is insufficient to meet the full requirements of our current and future national security interests. Second, in the absence of a single, existential threat to Australia's interests, balancing competing national security priorities will require a more comprehensive risk assessment process. Finally, the development of a national security strategy requires policymakers to adhere to the discipline of aligning resources to priorities.

Comparing strategic designs

For American strategists like Philip Zelikow, 'national security strategies start with a mental image of the world.'⁶ Perceptions of national interests are shaped by geography, history, strategic culture and economic profile as well as by a nation's common values and myths. These elements combine to give a country its strategic personality. Since Federation, Australia's own strategic personality has tended to waver from one end of the spectrum to the other—oscillating between periods of introversion (preferring attachment to 'great and powerful friends') and extroversion (seeking active leadership and greater 'independence').⁷

A common theme throughout Australia's post-World War II history is that we see ourselves as a regional middle power with global interests. That characterisation helps to frame the selection of a national security strategy. Australia has diverse national interests that must be pursued in diverse ways. Our major strategic ally

is in North America, our principal trading markets are in North Asia, and three oceans surround us, which gives a particularly maritime focus to our national security interests.

Working from a similar set of strategic challenges and employing similar definitions of national security, many countries have chosen to implement a single, comprehensive strategic planning document to guide policy development. The 2008 UK National Security Strategy, *Security in an Interdependent World*, explicitly argued that the publication of a strategy document was, in and of itself, an attempt to introduce a more integrated approach to national security planning.

Two years later, the 2010 UK strategy, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, suggested that the purpose of a national security strategy was broader than just articulating a joined-up, whole-of-government approach. The Cameron government put greater emphasis on balancing ends, ways and means in delivering national security outcomes, as part of a wider effort to rein in government spending. More attention has been given to identifying core priorities and matching priorities to capability planning.

Individual governments at different times will define national security interests according to their own political interests. And governments will be reluctant to identify a set of firm criteria for deciding why some issues are incorporated into the national security 'space' and why others are not. So ambiguity, flexibility and pluralism will continue to be highly valued in the construction of a national security policy.

Table 1: National security strategies—key themes

Country	Strategy document	Key themes
United Kingdom	<i>Security in an Interdependent World</i> (2008) <i>A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty</i> (2010)	Introduction of a three-tier hierarchy of threats. Top tier includes: terrorism (including potential CBRN attacks); cyberattacks; international military crisis; major accidents or natural disasters
France	The French White Paper on defence and national security (2008)	'Genuine' autonomy Nuclear deterrence Protection Innovation Crisis prevention
South Africa	Draft National External Security Strategy (1995) – not published	Protecting interests in a competitive world Contributing towards international peace Promoting regional security in Southern Africa Projecting a defensive and non-threatening military posture
Netherlands	National Security Strategy and Work Programme (2007–08)	Climate change Polarisation and radicalisation Energy supply Importance on international cooperation
Canada	<i>Securing an Open Society</i> (2004)	Terrorism WMD proliferation International stability Resilience and disaster management Pandemics

That said the comparison of national security priorities among similar countries shows a remarkable commonality of threat perceptions and a consistent hierarchy of risks and priorities. This suggests one of two things: either that mature Westphalian statehood produces a set of common security challenges regardless of geographic location or particular historical experiences; or that security planners are reluctant to stray very far from conventional wisdom.

In designing a national security strategy, governments need to think about ‘structure’ as well as priorities. Decisions about the ‘machinery of government’ are always an important part of the debate—especially in the areas of defence and foreign policy. The ‘machinery’ includes the division of ministerial portfolios, the structure and composition of Cabinet committees, and the various departmental organisations and interdepartmental arrangements that are put in place to support executive government.

The ‘machinery’ can work effectively, or not. It can facilitate coordination at both the political and bureaucratic levels, produce first-class policy options for decision-makers and it can drive the efficient allocation of limited resources. Weak, inefficient or incompetent ‘machinery’ tends to produce poor outcomes.

Again, there is a commonality of national security structures, especially among the non-US ‘five-eyes’ community. In 2010, the British government announced the introduction of a national security adviser position and the formation of a National Security Committee of Cabinet—structures that had been in place in Australia for several years. Most comparable countries have introduced a single, strategic planning document to guide policy.

The evolution of national security policy

The national security debate in Australia remains divided between those who focus on the consequences for military planning of the shifting power relativities in Asia and those who focus more on the domestic sources of insecurity—including terrorism, cybersecurity, transnational crime and espionage. The two sides of this debate tend to talk past each other, rather than to each other—and this is constraining the development of a truly comprehensive understanding of national security threats.

Moreover, the public perception of national security remains locked in a 2001–02 mindset, when the defining events of that period, including the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States and the first Bali bombings, fundamentally shaped and influenced our thinking about the nature of national security threats and the appropriate responses. Since then, Australian governments have done little to dissuade the public that national security equals counter-terrorism—the official government website www.nationalsecurity.gov.au is heavily devoted to counter-terrorism policies and plans. A more comprehensive public information campaign from government is urgently needed to define and articulate national security interests to the Australian people. A national security strategy would help.

A patchwork of strategies: can it work?

Current efforts to frame national security policy have focused on discrete aspects of the national security task. Individual reviews or policy framework documents have been produced for homeland security, energy security, intelligence, cybersecurity, information sharing, counter-terrorism and science and innovation.

For some commentators, this ‘patchwork’ approach to building national security policy is preferable to a top-down, deductive approach that would incorporate all elements of national security policy into a single strategic guidance document. The patchwork approach relies heavily on the coordination skills at the centre of government, in Australia’s case the National Security Adviser’s position in the

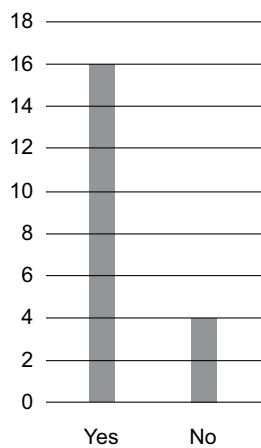
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, to ensure that the threads of each policy area are sufficiently joined-up, both conceptually and practically coherent.

A patchwork of strategies has some obvious advantages. It represents the path of least resistance for the bureaucracy. It also offers politicians the greatest flexibility in terms of prioritisation—a valuable asset when dealing with fast-paced and interconnected security risks and threats. And it would allow governments to ‘muddle through’ with the current policy settings, avoiding the more difficult task of having to make hard choices between agencies and capabilities.

However, a simple survey conducted by ASPI among twenty senior academics, bureaucrats and politicians involved in national security policy shows majority support for the idea of elevating the current arrangements to a formal national security strategy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: National Security Community Survey

Q. Does Australia need a national security strategy?



When asked ‘why?’, most respondents focused on one of three main reasons:

- resourcing—a strategy document would better align priorities to funding
- coordination—it would help to reduce the duplication of effort between agencies and various tiers of government
- communication—it would provide greater clarity for both government and the public.

Done properly, a single national security strategy would have other benefits. In the words of one senior practitioner, ‘the discipline of producing a national security strategy would be a useful exercise, in and of itself’. For reasons of transparency and confidence building, governments need to have a declared position on national security priorities. This is useful for communicating with both friends and enemies alike. And a single strategy document would also be a beacon for the national security community as it seeks to build patterns and habits of dialogue and cooperation.

The current series of discrete policy statements and external reviews does not equal, and is not a substitute for, a truly comprehensive national security strategy. Propagating multiple ‘strategy’ papers in areas as diverse as energy security, border protection and cybersecurity has resulted only in a fragmentation of effort, confused lines of responsibility, duplication of resources and conflicting policy priorities. For example, we recognise that a global pandemic influenza would potentially kill more people around the world than a limited nuclear exchange between the major

powers. And yet we devote much more time and resources to warfare than we do to disease prevention.

In the absence of a more coordinated approach, the 2009 Defence White Paper has become the de facto national security planning document. In a total national security budget of around \$33 billion per annum, defence consumes around 90% of all government funding for national security. The result has been a creeping militarisation of our national security policy.

Although governments recognise that a national security strategy must incorporate all instruments of national power—diplomacy, defence, intelligence and development assistance—the various strands of policy are sometimes applied inconsistently. This can be seen, for example, in the limited policy coordination towards Africa and the Arabian peninsula despite the fact that the 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper named Somalia and Yemen as among the most significant sources of threats to Australia and Australian interests.

AusAID's budget is expected to grow from around \$4 billion in 2010–11 to more than \$8 billion by 2015 as part of a bipartisan agreement to achieve the goal of 0.5% of gross national income spent on aid. But AusAID does not see itself as part of the national security community, and seeks to avoid 'securitising' the aid budget. In its response to the review of aid effectiveness, the government acknowledged that more aid would be devoted to promoting 'national interests', but there was little recognition of the contribution that aid can make to national security.

And the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has suffered from more than a decade of budget restrictions and is constrained in its ability to lead on national security debates. Today, DFAT lacks sufficient resources to shape international security outcomes, other than in supporting or secondary ways.

One of the consequences of 9/11 is that more resources have gone to the Australian Intelligence Community (AIC). On average, the intelligence agencies have received a 300% increase in funding since 2001. As a result, the AIC has become a more important player in the bureaucratic space for influence over the direction of national security policy.

A national security strategy — what needs to be done?

The articulation and development of a comprehensive national security strategy is not simply an intellectual exercise. Without all the major elements of national security policy framed within a single strategic guidance document, we cannot be confident that the policies, institutional and legislative arrangements we adopt are the most effective or appropriate.

Given the federal structure of government in Australia, a critical aspect of the national security strategy would be to knit together more tightly, and provide greater cohesiveness among, individual states, local governments and external players such as the business community and the community in a common vision for national security. As in other areas of public policy, the federalism problem presents unique challenges for governments in Canberra in trying to tie together geographically diverse regions and three tiers of government. This problem is particularly acute in the area of national security policy, where many national security capabilities reside with the state police, emergency management services and local government agencies.

There are several prerequisites for framing a national security strategy. The first task is to understand the global drivers of the threat environment. The 2009 Defence White Paper, provided some of the elements of a net assessment. However, the absence of a truly comprehensive national security risk assessment process is constraining the ability of governments to articulate a single strategic

policy. So investing in a whole-of-nation risk assessment framework is the first, and perhaps most important, step towards a national security strategy.

Australia has a diverse set of national security interests, driven by both domestic and international threats, but this does not mean that all threats are equal. So the second step would be to define more clearly the hierarchy of national security interests. Any policy framework must be informed by a clear sense of priorities. Although these priorities will change over time, in the current security environment Australia's top-tier interests would include: responding to both domestic and global terrorism; strengthening our resilience against cyberattacks and cybercrime; enhancing the rules-based international order; promoting stability and democracy in Asia and the Pacific regions; and preventing major power confrontation in our region.

National interests are the starting point for a national security strategy, but it is a national vision that defines where that policy is ultimately headed. Central to that vision is Australia's active engagement with the world. For most of our post-World War II history, governments in Canberra have defined our place in the world as that of an Asia–Pacific middle power. Our security and our prosperity are closely linked to both regional and global developments. But if threats to national security were to emerge, they are more likely to come from developments within our own geographic neighbourhood.

The concept of *cooperative security* is one that neatly captures the full range of Australia's national security interests.⁸ Although borrowed from the international security domain, and often used as a synonym for UN collective security principles, cooperative security can be applied usefully to our national security policy. It has both external and internal dimensions. Externally, the idea of cooperative security privileges building coalitions of like-minded countries to deal with common security problems. Issues such as nuclear proliferation, transnational crime and terrorism are obvious examples of security problems that cross national boundaries and therefore require cooperative international responses. Domestically, the concept acknowledges that national security threats cannot be dealt with by one tier of government or even one government itself acting alone without the support of business and the wider community. As the convergence of domestic and foreign policy increases over the next decade, cooperation between and among governments will become a more critical element of national security policy.

A fourth element in framing a national security strategy is aligning ends and means. As the American journalist Walter Lippmann once said, good foreign policy can only be sustained when commitments and power are brought into balance. In Lippmann's classic formulation of the problem, 'the nation must maintain its objectives and its power in equilibrium, its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes'.⁹ As a middle power, there are few national security challenges that Australia will be able to handle alone. Therefore, the selection of national security priorities and capabilities becomes a more critical task, particularly in a more constrained fiscal environment. The proposed national security budget must become the central planning tool for spending across the national security community and not simply a paper exercise in coordination.

The final element is fixing the governance arrangements around national security. There are two further reforms that a national security strategy should address. The first concerns the role of the National Security Adviser (NSA). The current list of responsibilities for the NSA, and the relationship between that position and the statutory responsibilities of both directors general of ASIO and ONA, needs to be made more explicit. Short of placing the NSA on a statutory basis, a clearer set of duty requirements and responsibilities would ensure that national security arrangements in the future were not reliant on goodwill and personal relationships.

The institutional basis for domestic security planning also needs to change. There is a disconnection between the coordination functions of the NSA based in the Prime Minister's department and the operational agencies, most of which fall under the Attorney-General's portfolio. Creating a separate Department of Home Affairs, which included responsibility for both the national security strategy and the operational capabilities in intelligence, policing, emergency management, border protection and counter-terrorism, would improve the overall link between policy, budgets and outcomes. The position of Minister for Home Affairs should be a Cabinet-level appointment.

Conclusion

National security must be thought of differently from other aspects of public policy. It involves greater guesswork, less certainty and therefore higher risks. It relies on nested networks of relationships between individuals, agencies and governments. And it is simultaneously top-down and bottom-up. However, we still try to deal with issues like cybersecurity or countering violent extremism as if they were discrete, manageable problems with an identifiable institutional 'home'.

An Australian national security strategy, built around the concept of cooperative security, and informed by the discipline of a national risk assessment process, the better alignment of resources to priorities and clearer lines of ministerial responsibility, is the logical next step in our evolving security policy arrangements.

Endnotes

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About the author

Dr Carl Ungerer is ASPI's National Security Program Director.

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ASPI
Tel + 61 2 6270 5100
Fax + 61 2 6273 9566
Email enquiries@aspi.org.au
Web www.aspi.org.au

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