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The devil in the detail: Australia's first National Security Statement

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When US President Harry Truman signed the first National Security Act in 1947 it was the most significant reorganisation of America's foreign and defence establishment since the Civil War.

Truman and his advisers settled on the term 'national security' because the alternatives available at the time such as 'national defense' or 'common defense' were considered too narrow a platform on which to base the exercise of America's power.

But there was no doubting the focus of the national security effort—it was about global military threats and the intelligence apparatus needed to stop them. There would be no more Pearl Harbors (at least not until 9/11). The Act brought together the army, navy and air force into a single coordinated and integrated force under civilian leadership and established the main agencies of the intelligence community, including the CIA.

Sixty years later, Australia's first national security statement is more modest in its goals. Middle powers like Australia, conscious of their relative influence in the world, tend to avoid grand strategic designs. The challenges today are about broadening the scope of the national security concept and creating a national security architecture for the 21st century.

The publication of the national security statement follows a similar strategy paper published by the British government in March this year. The *National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World* also sought to redefine national security interests in a more holistic fashion.

Beyond bombs and bullets

It is clear from both these documents that the concept of national security has shifted from its traditional moorings in the defence and intelligence establishment. There is also a deliberate effort in Australia's national security statement to relocate terrorism within a broader spectrum of transnational security risks. National security, in contrast to the Howard government's approach, is no longer a synonym for counter-terrorism.

Most security analysts agree that the traditional focus of national security on state-based threats and military responses is now outmoded and does not adequately reflect the scope and connectivity of contemporary security challenges. Indeed, the statement borrows much from the conceptualisation of security that has been used in Asia for the last thirty years. Threats are interconnected. And the pace of globalisation means that the challenges of the future will increasingly involve cross-border threats from a range of non-state actors.

The statement's core judgement is that Australia's national security interests are more complex and less predictable than in the past. Complexity is evident in the way international and domestic security issues intertwine—terrorist groups finance themselves through front companies and charities, some criminal gangs have bought military equipment.

This broader approach to national security should serve to improve the quality of public and political debate about Australia's security interests.

Although not revolutionary in scope, the document outlines a commonsense framework for examining the full spectrum of threats, risks and hazards facing Australia. It is meant to provide guidance and direction to the concurrent reviews on defence, energy security and counter-terrorism. And it will also inform a regular foreign policy statement to the parliament.

The national security statement specifically identifies a range of ongoing security concerns from the current insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq to fragile states in the South Pacific, the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, the risks of terrorism both at home and abroad, transnational organised crime, cyber-security and international health threats such as pandemic diseases.

Many of these threats are not new. But the attention given problems such as transnational crime and climate change would not have registered on the national security agenda even ten years ago. The paper usefully focuses on response mechanisms to catastrophic natural disasters in Australia or overseas: unlike terrorism, which is a possibility, natural disasters are a certainty and with a changing climate have the potential to become more extreme and frequent.

There are, however, some notable gaps in the statement's analysis. Threats are not listed in any order of priority. It reads more like a list of horrors than a careful risk assessment (see Table on page 3).There is no attempt, for example, to develop the approach the British adopted with their National Risk Register released in August this year.

The UK risk register captures the range of emergencies that might have serious national consequences. Risks are categorised as accidents, such as industrial or transport; natural events, such as floods; and malicious attacks, including terrorism. It examines each risk and outlines appropriate responses, not just from government, but from business, families, individuals and the wider community. Risks are assessed on their likelihood and potential impact. Using these criteria, the most significant risk currently facing British citizens is a human pandemic flu.

The Australian statement provides no identifiable metric for deciding how some issues will engage national security agencies and why others won't. It doesn't shed much light, for example, on whether the 2007 equine influenza outbreak would, under a broader definition of security as proposed in the statement, have been considered a national security issue. And there's little recognition that the major international security crises of recent years, such as the strategic surprise of 9/11, demonstrate that we must expect the unexpected.

Australia's national security challenges ranked according to issue*

Challenge	Number of citations
Terrorism, violent extremism	27
Global/regional instability and conflict, failed and fragile states	9
Global transition, major power shift, Asia-Pacific century	8
Energy security	8
Border security	8
Climate change	7
WMD, global non-proliferation	6
People trafficking/people smuggling	6
Espionage and foreign interference	4
Organised crime	4
Cyber attacks, e-security and e-espionage	4
Resilience	3
Disease pandemics	3
Natural disasters	3
Population movements	2
Demographic changes	2
Resource pressures	2
Illegal exploitation of resources	1
Transport security	1
Drugs, arms trafficking	1

** based on the number of citations in the National Security Statement*

So what is Australia doing to respond to this growing list of risks and pressures? As set out in the statement, government efforts at the international level will focus on alliance commitments, regional engagement and strengthening multilateral institutions. The latter is crucial: without stronger multilateral institutions, the prospects of dealing with future challenges like climate change, energy security or terrorism will be limited.

In regional terms, there is a continuing emphasis given to the special role of the intelligence services and the use of military force. Overall, the document provides a sensible approach to balancing security threats and responses. For example, it has useful things to say about the direction of Australian counter-terrorism policy and the need to improve community social cohesion in order to counter violent extremism.

On the home front the statement doesn't provide much guidance to business on how it can enhance national security, except in the limited sense of ensuring business continuity arrangements are in place for protecting critical infrastructure. It's a pity that the statement did not make more of the concept of resilience as an organising principle for community engagement on national security issues.

New machinery

The strategy suggests that all government departments, not just the traditional ones like Foreign Affairs and Defence, should have responsibility for national security.

Although the statement stops short of recommending any major functional changes to our national security agencies, it sensibly suggests that the compartmentalised approach to information sharing is no longer appropriate. The statement acknowledges the need for more integrated structures for our national security planning and coordination.

However, it rejects the more ambitious bureaucratic reorganisations such as the creation of a Homeland Security department that Labor had promised in Opposition or a new statutory authority to develop and oversee national security policy.

The appointment of a National Security Adviser and the centralisation of policy coordination in the Office of National Security might bring some genuine cross-agency cohesion to security policy. But individual agencies still have defined roles and responsibilities to perform. Old habits of protecting departmental fiefdoms may yet frustrate efforts to foster greater cohesiveness across the bureaucracy.

To partly assist in bridging some of these gaps, the statement proposes the establishment of an executive development program on national security, initially for senior officials but later to include enrolments from the private and non-government sectors. One of the options suggested for delivering such a program is a National Security College.

The statement provides no details on the curriculum, ownership, staffing or location of such an institution. But if appropriately resourced, a National Security College may help to create a community of professionals with a comprehensive knowledge of the requirements for national security policy and provide a focal point for greater innovation and interaction across the sector.

Priorities and budgets

The creation of a single national security budget is potentially the most innovative change to the national security arrangements proposed in the Prime Minister's statement. With the government's investment in national security at a record high, a more efficient mechanism to set priorities and to measure performance is long overdue. But in the absence of a methodology for risk prioritisation, constructing a single national security budget will take time to develop.

For several years, the National Security Committee of Cabinet has examined the budgets of the six national intelligence agencies together, providing relevant Ministers with an opportunity to scrutinise budgets across portfolios. This should now be expanded to include all elements of the federal government engaged in national security policy.

A single national security budget would require clear policy direction from the National Security Adviser to bring priorities and forward planning into line. Will that person be able to shift resources across and between agencies in response to identified risks and pressures or will he simply play a coordinating role? If it's only a reactive role then a cynic might suggest that the introduction of the National Security Adviser position doesn't amount to much more than a re-badging exercise.

Similarly, the statement's commitment to a new reporting cycle, coordinated by the National Security Adviser, to consider performance against whole-of-government outcomes in light of the priorities set out in the national security statement, could be an effective tool in the construction of a more unified and nimble national security policy. On the other hand, done poorly, or in a perfunctory manner, it could lead to policy inertia.

The statement acknowledges a continuing role for the Office of National Assessments at the apex of the Australian intelligence community. But intelligence remains subordinate to policy, so the balance of power will shift away from ONA's statutory coordination role to the office of the National Security Adviser.

The National Security Adviser will also chair the new National Intelligence Coordination Committee. So some leakage of power away from the other intelligence chiefs can be expected. Over time, this could replicate the American system in which the Director of National Intelligence provides oversight and guidance to the intelligence community as a whole. That arrangement has attracted widespread criticism and led to the view that the quality of interaction and engagement among the national security agencies is more important than the institutional architecture that supports it.

A possible complicating factor concerns the role and functions of the Secretaries Committee on National Security (SCNS) which will continue to be chaired by the Secretary of the Prime Minister's department. As deputy chair of SCNS, the National Security Adviser will be just one of several sources of policy advice to Cabinet on national security issues. This may or may not create tensions in the chain of bureaucratic advice to Cabinet, but it has the potential to undermine the wider objective of giving the National Security Adviser and his office sufficient powers to coordinate the national security effort as a whole.

Concluding remarks

The inaugural national security statement is not the end of the process. There is now a great deal of work to be done in joining the dots between the growing list of identified risks and better national security outcomes. Regular security statements to parliament have been promised. This will offer greater public scrutiny of policy objectives and outcomes. However, time will tell whether the necessary degree of trust and cooperation between agencies develops to implement the networked, joined-up approach that the new national security statement sensibly advocates.

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