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Measuring up: evaluating cohesion in the national security community

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Since the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, governments in Australia and elsewhere have been looking to identify appropriate performance indicators with which to measure the national security effort. Fiscal pressures following the global financial crisis in 2008 have given this task greater urgency. Agencies across the public sector are trying to find efficiencies and more effective ways to spend the national security dollar.

Performance measures and evaluation are an important part of this task. They ensure that spending is kept in line with strategic and operational objectives. They can provide governments with a useful management tool—performance measures can be used to ensure accountability and to drive future resource allocations. But it's hard to identify appropriate measures, particularly when seeking to apply those measures across the entire spectrum of national security institutions, activities and agencies, which in Australia's case now covers more than 20% of the federal bureaucracy.

In the 2008 National Security Statement to Parliament, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that a key element of the government's national security architecture would be the implementation of a new 'strategic policy framework'. This framework, which included the promise of periodic statements to parliament, was designed as a mechanism to 'guide and coordinate effort across the national security community by setting priorities, allocating resources and evaluating performance'.[1] Subsequent statements on national security have touched on the theme of building a more cohesive community.

This paper examines the introduction of the 'strategic policy framework' and the use of performance indicators in Australia's national security planning more broadly. Drawing on a comparison of performance evaluation systems used in similar jurisdictions overseas, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom, we suggest a set of interim national security community performance measures to be used in the Australian setting.[2]

Establishing the context

Australia has a short history of framing a comprehensive national security policy. Prior to the 2008 National Security Statement, federal governments divided the national security task into separate policy streams, issuing individual white papers on foreign policy, defence and development

assistance. On those rare occasions when efforts were made to combine policy streams—for example, when strategic policy reviews for defence and foreign affairs were published simultaneously in 1997—the effect on the level of overlap and the cohesion of policy outcomes was minimal.

Following the Smith review of homeland and border security arrangements in 2008, the main thrust of the government's national security strategy has been to build greater cohesion and cooperation across the growing number of federal government agencies that have responsibility for, or involvement in, national security policy. For Smith, the principal means of achieving this model were building a sense of 'community' among national security agencies and removing the cultural and technical barriers between them.[3]

Two main assumptions have driven this approach: first, that the core national security agencies (Defence, Foreign Affairs and the intelligence community) were insufficiently 'joined up'; second, that the broadening of the national security agenda into areas such as climate change and energy meant that many new agencies that had no history of working on national security issues were now required to step up.

Both of those assumptions have been the subject of an intense and ongoing debate. Within the bureaucracy, many would argue that turf wars and 'information silos' are a figment of the media's imagination. And, despite the occasional hiccup[4], it is generally accepted that the national security community is operating with a greater degree of openness and interoperability than at any time in its history. But lingering concerns remain. In the wake of the failed 2009 Christmas Day bombing of a US airliner by a Nigerian student, the spotlight has again been turned on the degree to which national security agencies, and the intelligence agencies in particular, have fully integrated their communications, analysis and operational roles.

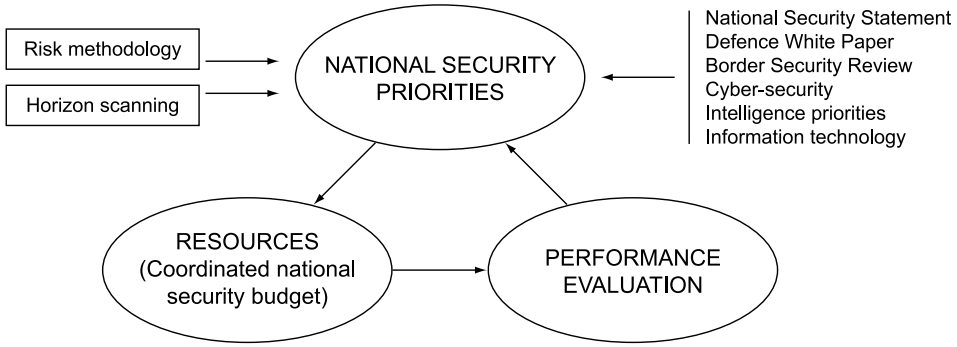
In Australia, the connectivity problem is highlighted by the continuing lack of a single information technology architecture that allows all members of the national security community to work together. Although the government has appointed a chief information officer for national security to fix this problem, it will take another 10 years before these systems are in place.[5]

The government's desire to both deepen and broaden the national security community has been reflected also in the establishment of new institutions such as the Office of National Security in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the National Security College at the Australian National University. As the centerpiece of these reforms, the creation of the National Security Adviser's position was meant to be the connective glue that would bind the various elements of the national security community together. It reflected a key recommendation of the earlier review of homeland and border security arrangements—that what the federal government needed was more leadership and not more bureaucracy.

The 'strategic policy framework' is the mechanism that has been chosen by the government to guide this new approach to performance evaluation. It is based on three streams of activity—priority setting, resource allocation and performance review.

Under the framework, the National Security Adviser is required to consider and report on the performance of the national security community against whole-of-government outcomes in the light of priorities identified by the National Security Statement and other reviews. This advice will then be used by the National Security Committee of Cabinet to decide on resource allocations as part of a single national security budget. The first iteration of the coordinated budget was announced by the Attorney-General in May 2010 with a proposed investment of

Strategic policy framework



$4.3 billion across a number of areas including border protection, aviation and identity security and support for the Australian Defence Force.[6] Most observers considered it to be a modest first step.[7]

Currently, across the public sector, the government measures *outcomes* rather than *outputs* as the primary method of judging performance. The focus on *outcomes* requires an assessment of program activity relative to its intended purpose. In other words, outcomes are directed towards the achievement of a particular 'end state'. In the case of Australia's national security priorities, that end state has been defined by the government as a cohesive national security 'culture'.[8]

Although creating a single national security culture might be considered a laudable goal, measuring its progress or final achievement would not be easy. For example, how will we know when an Australian national security culture has been established? What would it look like? And what are the key differences between how the various national security agencies operate today, and how they would operate in a more unified cultural context?

The problem here is that a single 'national security culture' remains undefined and probably unattainable. Within the wider national security community it may be possible to identify some loose affiliations across government, universities and the public that would be regarded as *sub*cultural groupings, such as the arms control community, the aid community or the defence community. But these subcultural groupings don't often talk to each other. Sometimes, they are in direct disagreement. None could be said to be fully cohesive, in the sense of working towards a shared purpose or goal.

If the government, in speaking of a 'cohesive culture', simply has in mind the promotion of a common language and a common set of bureaucratic norms and behaviours, achieving these outcomes becomes a more manageable task. Of course, this would be the lowest common denominator approach, but it would at least provide a clearer roadmap for those given the task of implementing the strategic policy framework.

It should be noted that cohesion may not be warranted in all circumstances. There are still hard barriers between the compartmentalised world of the intelligence agencies and the more operational aspects of policing and community engagement. And there is a danger that too much cohesion will undermine the specialisation and subject-matter expertise that is necessary in national security planning and assessments.

Trends in performance measurement overseas

The search for better national security measures is not confined to Australia. Several comparable countries are engaged in a similar process of evaluation, and some with a longer tradition of centralised national security planning, such as the UK, are further down the track than Australia in implementing such measures.

The British government introduced a targets-based approach in the 1990s that sought to measure improvements in public services through a series of public service agreements between individual agencies and the Treasury. In the case of the Home Office, for example, the aim of the counter-terrorism agreement is to 'reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from international terrorism'. The risk reduction strategy is measured by quantifying specific targets, including improving the security at crowded public places, increasing border security through enhanced electronic surveillance and developing police counter-terrorist capabilities.

Targets have the benefit of public accountability. Governments can demonstrate a commitment to a particular outcome and be judged on performance by the electorate. However, as the UK experience has shown, much of the national security agenda is classified and therefore not appropriate for the setting of public targets. Understandably, no formal targets on intelligence collection or analysis have been published.

As a result, policy makers and practitioners in the UK continue to have serious reservations about the effectiveness of employing targets.[9] They can force individual managers to face the wrong way—spending too much time ticking boxes, and not spending enough time achieving national security outcomes for the government as a whole. Compliance costs can be high, and front-line staff can often be diverted from more important activities.

The first British National Security Strategy, *Security in an interdependent world*, also promised greater 'coherence and effectiveness across government', but stopped short of nominating specific performance measures other than a commitment to keeping existing structures and processes under review. Under the broad banner of 'working together', there was an expectation that cohesion would be achieved as part of the coordination efforts to service the various needs of the Cabinet Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development.

The other inveterate reformer in this field has been the United States. Following the Hoover Commission's recommendation of imposing a 'performance budget' in 1949, successive American presidents have sought to implement results-based budgeting processes across the US government, including Johnson's planning–programming–budgeting system, Nixon's management by objectives, Carter's zero-based budgeting and Clinton's National Performance Review. The Obama Administration has recently taken up this mantle, announcing a set of new high-priority performance goals for each government agency.[10]

Like the UK targets approach, current performance goals for US national security include specific, measurable outcomes such as a 5% increase in total counter-terrorism investigations by the Department of Justice by the end of 2011. The US approach also seeks to incorporate a more rigorous cost-benefit analysis as part of the evaluation cycle, a subject that ASPI has previously addressed.[11]

What we can see from this comparison is that in areas where there is a functional focus, for example the screening of passengers at airports or installing CCTV cameras at high-risk locations, the metrics for improving outcomes are quantifiable and clear. However, across the core national security areas of defence, intelligence and security policy, measurement becomes more difficult when subjective judgements are called for, such as the US State Department's goal to 'improve

global controls to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons' or 'helping the Iraqi people continue to build a sovereign, stable and self-reliant country'.

Measuring cohesion in the national security community

Ideally, performance measures for Australia's national security should address tangible outcomes across the full national security agenda. Many are currently employed within individual departments and agencies. However, none are focused on the nature of the national security community as a whole. Given the complexity of the contemporary security environment, and the fact that national security outcomes will be shaped by many hands, both inside and outside government, identifying a set of performance measures addressing a 'cohesive culture' warrants further consideration.

If we accept for the moment that the current priority outcome for the national security community is greater cohesion across the various agencies—Australia's equivalent of the UK 'working together' goal—it should be possible to devise a set of performance measures that focus on the intermediate or enabling steps towards achieving that goal. Here, we are attracted to four descriptive measures that could be used to guide future evaluation: comprehensiveness, connectivity, consistency and complementarity.

The government has identified more than twenty separate issues to be considered under the rubric of the National Security Statement. These issues range from immediate threats, such as homegrown terrorism and organised crime, right through to the protection and maintenance of state sovereignty. As a first step, a *comprehensiveness* measure could be employed to judge the depth of expertise across the national security community on each of these issues and the extent to which all interests and actors are incorporated into the decision-making process. Measurements might include completion rates of both generic and specific courses as part of the National Security College, as well as a register of experts across government, academe and the community. Complex issues such as climate change and energy security require high levels of engagement with the scientific community both in Australia and overseas. A further measure of success here would be the degree to which policy makers had incorporated the most accurate and up-to-date information in national security planning.

The second objective that the government should seek to measure is the level of human and technological *connectivity* across the national security community. In addition to improving the conformity of information management systems, the chief information officer should seek to measure the 'strength' and 'resilience' of existing communication networks across and between agencies. This would provide a useful baseline data set against which future performance could be judged.

Increasingly, national security outcomes will depend on inter-agency structures that connect governments to outside information and expertise, including businesses and community groups. One outcome that could be measured is the nature and extent of formal linkages between agencies, and between agencies and relevant community groups. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation has well-established protocols for dealing with business through a dedicated liaison unit and the National Threat Assessment Centre. But most other national security agencies do not have similar structures. Measures to improve the quality and timeliness of those interactions might prove to be a viable alternative to the broader goal of cohesion.

A third measure is *consistency*. Building cohesiveness across the national security community can be judged by measuring the level of consistency between stated policy objectives and outcomes. In the US, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence uses surveys, focus groups and interviews to gauge progress on integration and coordination within the intelligence community.[12] A similar process

could be adopted here by the Office of the National Security Adviser to measure policy consistency over time.

Finally, the national security community must demonstrate a stronger correlation between priority settings and resource allocations. This is where the test of *complementarity* becomes important. Policy makers should be able to demonstrate a more direct relationship between current assessments of national security threats and the allocation of human and financial resources to meet those particular challenges. Although the government has embarked on the process of announcing a single national security budget as part of the annual budgetary cycle, there needs to be a more coherent articulation of the rationale for spending priorities. Currently, Australia's prioritisation of national security risks remains mostly informal and intuitive.

Interim performance measures of cohesion

Comprehensiveness	Connectivity	Consistency	Complementarity
Depth and breadth of expertise	Conformity of information systems	Balance between policy and outcomes	Clear articulation of threats, measures and resources
Formal qualifications	Strength and resilience of networks	Common objectives and goals	Level of focus on priorities across agencies
Level of incorporation of external advice	Links to business and community groups		

As part of a package of interim performance measures, governments could consider ranking the top three to five national security priority issues each year and allocate funding through the federal budget accordingly. Each iteration of the national security budget could then be used as both a measurement of progress towards achieving outcomes against each priority area and a means of adjusting settings for the following budgetary cycle.

Endnotes

1 K Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, *National Security Statement to Parliament*, 4 December 2008, http://www.pm.gov.au/node/5424.

2 This paper draws on several recent reports measuring national security performance, including C Edwards, *National security for the 21st century*, London, DEMOS, 2007; R Perl, 'Combating terrorism: the challenge of measuring effectiveness', CRS Report to Congress, March 2007; and background research conducted by the University of Queensland Social Research Centre as part of a study commissioned by the Australian Federal Police.

3 R Smith, *Report of the Review of Homeland and Border Security—summary and conclusions*, 27 June 2008.

4 See, for example, the findings of the 2007 Street Review of interoperability between the Australian Federal Police and its national security partners, http://www.afp.gov.au/~/media/afp/pdf/t/the-street-review.ashx.

5 See the National Security Information Environment Roadmap, http://www.dpmc.gov.au/national_security/docs/national_security_information_environment_roadmap.df. Also, see K O'Hara and A Bergin, *Information sharing in Australia's national security community*, ASPI Policy Analysis No. 51, 27 November 2009. http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=232.

6 R McClelland, Attorney-General, and others, *Strengthening Australia's national security capacity*, media release, 11 May 2010.

7 See A Bergin, 'Single security budget is our best defence', *ABC Online*, 26 May 2010.

8 K Rudd, 'New strategic relationship with ANU', 2009 Burgmann College lecture, Australian National University, 27 August 2009, http://news.anu.edu.au/?p=1639.

9 C.Edwards, *National security for the 21st century*, pp. 99–106.

10 See http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2011/assets/management.pdf.

11 ASPI Special Report Issue 18—*Risky business: Measuring the costs and benefits of counter-terrorism spending*, November 2008. http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=190.

12 US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *500 Day Plan: follow-up report*, http://www.dni.gov/500-day-plan/500%20Day%20Plan%20Follow%20Up%20Report%20part%201.pdf.

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