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By

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PRESENTATION TO INSS CONFERENCE ON
MEETING COMPLEX SECURITY CHALLENGES THROUGH
NATIONAL SECURITY REFORM

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By

ADMIRAL CHRIS BARRIE AC RAN Reserve

I am very pleased to be able to participate in this important conference, and to be able to give an Australian perspective on reform from a national security perspective. Much of what I have to say will be in concert with what you have heard already – so “no surprises” here hopefully.

As seen from the agenda I pursued when Chief of the Australian Defence Force from 1998 until 2002, a great deal has changed. During my tenure it was a struggle in Australia to get critical issues of defence policy and the national security agenda taken seriously within the Australian community, and even within some parts of government. We had undertaken the Defence Efficiency Review in 1996/97 leading to the Defence Reform Program that was launched in May, 1997 designed to recover 10% savings from the “tail” within the budget to be devoted to enhancing capability within the force. This was all tough work because the prevailing attitude had been that “it will be all right, mate” that translated into “don’t bother me now, I am not interested”.

Fortunately, as the Howard Government grew from its early cautious days in office from March 1996 into a more positive and understanding group of decision makers the commitment of Federal Government Ministers was never in doubt when it came to matters of national security.

But the same could not be said of state level counterparts, or of parts of the federal, state and local bureaucracies. We had to work hard to engage with colleagues in other components of the national security architecture and build relationships and trust. We were not deterred by the occasional failure to understand where we were coming from because of the importance of this work. Our leadership mantra was never to take “no” for an answer in trying to get things done. Admittedly, from time to time we had to use the strategy of the indirect approach to achieve our objective. Finally we always were ready to offer help to the other agencies as they needed it when we could. I believe that it is this factor alone that made a huge contribution to the development of a coherent approach to national security at the time.

Against this background I ought to point out that we were able to take on the leadership role to provide security in East Timor in September 1999 in heading up then international coalition force at the time, but only after appropriately positioning our military readiness

profile at considerable additional cost and effort from March of that year. After that we were a central player in supporting a whole-of-government approach to the provision of security to the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 with considerable success. The priority we placed on our effort was based on our strong conviction and intelligence assessments that there would be a serious security incident at those games. But in the process of undertaking these tasks we were learning a great deal about what needed to be done to enhance our national security, particularly if we had to shift from an “on occasion” to a “constant threat” basis.

And finally in December 2000 the Howard Government delivered a new Defence White Paper that sought to lift expenditure on our military capabilities to 3% of GDP, against a background of growing unease about the security situation in our region. Moreover, this particular white paper process also incorporated the results of a public consultation on strategic and defence issues for the first time in our history. Engaging the wider community in discussion of our national defence needs at that time I think presaged the need to engage the wider community in discussion of our national security needs.

I make these points because they predate the events of September 11, 2001.

All of this sounds simple against where we have been since October 2001. But before moving onto make some remarks focused more precisely to the themes of this conference I ought to paint a picture of the differences between Australia’s situation and that of the United States.

Most importantly we, Australians, see ourselves playing a very supportive role with the U.S. in the lead in trying to build a better world. In return we expect from the U.S. security guarantees that no other nation on this earth can provide. We have a small population – 21 million – yet our island land mass equates roughly to that of the continental United States. Our armed forces are very small – about 85 thousand all up on a good day – that is less than the number of spectators at the Melbourne grand final football match. The Australian Defence Force is an all volunteer force and will remain so in the near future. As an island country with no land borders we enjoy certain security advantages, yet we also face our own strategic challenges. In some ways we could argue that Australia is relatively sheltered from many of the threats that other countries have to deal with. Yet, Australians possess a strong sense of insecurity – a sense that has led them to fight in many parts of the world that have little to do with our basic security needs.

Apart from New Zealand - our near neighbor and also a close friend, except on the Rugby field, to the North and relatively close to Australia are a range of countries that from time-to-time have presented significant policy issues for decision makers. Our nearest neighbor, and a significant strategic pre-occupation, is Indonesia – the world’s most populous Islamic country. Democracy rules in Indonesia right now and many of us pray that it will continue to do so. Our relationship is recovering from the depths of the impact of the intervention in East Timor and quite quickly it seems with a great deal of good will on both sides.

Elsewhere, in our part of the world we are challenged by the question of how to approach a range of challenges. How should we deal with the political instability in Fiji, for example, or the political and criminal violence that beset the Solomon Islands, or peace making in Bougainville after the civil unrest that broke out there within the sovereign state of Papua New Guinea – a country which if measured by criminal violence in Port Moresby or occasionally inept and/or corrupt governance (though we have seen less of this in more recent times) has been a considerable disappointment for us and occasionally a cause for major concern. In these areas we are inclined to think carefully about how to deal with challenges through our own initiatives, in conjunction with close friends and allies.

Of course we are also very interested in the future relationships with China, now our largest trading partner, and Japan as well other countries in North-East and India and Pakistan and where they might head. But in this part of the globe, in most circumstances, we would expect to be acting in concert with the United States whose leadership is critically important. We do not kid ourselves that in these parts of the world Australia can act alone.

In South-East Asia we engage with all ASEAN countries as closely as circumstances allow in the expectation that what we do can make a difference.

As well, our economy has performed pretty well by most standards in recent years though we are not immune from the effects of the current collapse of confidence in free markets and our financial institutions. Even so we think that we are well positioned to deal with longer term consequences because of our healthy federal budget surplus.

So, a picture I would like people to have in their minds is that we are a small country that faces many of the same problems as the U.S. but because of our small population and the dynamics of the geo-strategic situation we have to be very clever at finding appropriate solutions. As Vice Admiral Art Cebrowski once said to me when he was Head of the Office of Force Transformation:

“The U.S. and Australia have the same problems but whereas our tendency is simply to throw resources at the problem in the hope that a solution can be found, you will think hard about innovative and resourceful answers that the U.S. can often learn from.”

So what can I say about meeting complex challenges in national security?

My start point is to connect up the dots on the leadership trail. In my view the most significant impact in problem solving comes out of leader behavior. If our leaders want to fight each other over turf battles then our organizations will fight too. If our leaders want to make excuses for failing to get things done we should do something about that too. But, if our leaders behave collegiately and we are able to reward collegiate behavior, it

does not take long before many other people will learn to help each other too. In my experience this kind of behavior really is kicked off at the highest level of Government and in our case it started in our National Security Committee of the Cabinet under the leadership of the Prime Minister and it grew out from there. On a number of occasions when our Department of Foreign Affairs was strapped for funds, for example, we, in Defence, were sure able to help get them out of a fix to our mutual benefit.

My second point, to put it crudely in the words of a former Secretary of Defence that I learned a great deal from, is that you do not keep a dog and bark yourself. In other words whenever we have had to face situations such as peace monitoring in Bougainville, or the current commitment in the Solomon Islands or supporting the plebiscite in East Timor it was much better to engage the real experts in conducting the various tasks that were required rather than trying to do them all ourselves. On occasions, such as in the Solomon Islands right now the military is operating under the leadership of a civilian official who holds the authority of our Government in developing appropriate responses to local needs. This arrangement is not a problem for us.

We in the military are very good at using armed force but others are much better at policing and institution building. We have learned in the last decade to build the necessary partnerships. One early example of the learning that stands out in my mind was the wonderful way in which AUSAID and the ADF co-operated in distributing food aid in remote regions of Irian Jaya in 1998 to the benefit of local people who got all of the food and the accompanying TNI soldiers who behaved themselves in our presence, and AUSAID and ADF people who knew that they had carried out job well done with the full appreciation of the local communities.

I digress here to explain that in the Australian command system no civilian can give a lawful order to a military person. The highest command authority in Australia is vested in the Chief of the Defence Force under law. But, the CDF is given directions by the Minister of Defence who is accountable to the Parliament. In practice, and I am sure it will nearly always be so, the Prime Minister takes the lead in crisis and the Minister directs what the Cabinet has decided. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Howard and now continuing equally as effectively under Prime Minister Rudd the Chief of the Defence Force is a member of the National Security Committee of the Cabinet, but not in a decision making role. So, also are the Secretaries (Department Heads) of Prime Minister and the Cabinet, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Attorney-General, Treasury, and Finance. This is truly collegiate decision making at the top.

I should also add here that next month the Prime Minister will open a new Asia-Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence near Canberra, to focus on bringing a range of agencies together to develop practical contributions to stabilization, reconstruction and peacekeeping. According to the Government this Centre will “hardwire integration into the planning and management of operations and in prevention and co-operation activities. The first head of this Centre will be a former two star general with significant experience in the field.

My second focus is on our collective responsibility to deal with inefficiency and waste, especially as we seem to be rapidly approaching a huge train smash in all our budgets. Do we think that there are no practical limits on how much we can spend on national security? Acknowledgement of the extent of the potential budgetary problem that we might face appeared yesterday: an Australian newspaper was giving out a very strong hint that our new defence white paper, which has been under active preparation this year will not be released until well into 2009 because of the magnitude and importance of the decisions that Government may have to take in light of the loss of budget revenue and the need to inject capital into the economy.

Similarly though the Report on the National Security Strategy, prepared by the former Secretary for Defence, has been with Government for over three months I cannot see any real evidence as to when it will be released, though it has been anticipated for some weeks now. My guess is that the report contains a number of reform measures that will need significant additional funding. We may also see the appointment of a national security adviser to the Government.

For example, a recent press report has indicated that we may adopt the development of a national risk register modeled on the British approach as part of that strategy. The register is meant to capture the range of emergencies that might have a serious national impact. In the British system risks are categorized as accidents, such as industrial or transport; natural events, such as floods; and malicious attacks, including terrorism. It examines each risk in these categories, and outlines appropriate responses, not just from government, but from business, families, and individuals and the wider community.¹ This is an all-hazards approach to national security.

As I see today's circumstances all of us must strive in our efforts to rebase the fundamentals of what we do. Going back to 1997 we did find it possible to achieve a 10% efficiency dividend, but then we were able to spend it on ourselves! Within my defence force I never found a unit or other organization that could not find efficiencies and eliminate waste. Of course the trick in obtaining success was how these behaviors were rewarded, or seen to be rewarded.

Nonetheless, in today's climate in order to make the available resources cover the competing demands of defence, health, education, and other national security requirements in the most effective way we all have to play our part. In this context I believe our military organizations can make a very significant contribution because of the extent of our national budget allocations. I would also suggest this is an area where we can take an early lead if leadership is up to the challenge.

A third area of building up our capacity to deal with national security challenges concerns education. To my mind it not a sufficient answer to the challenges we confront to go on thinking that security is the concern of the professionals only. In my view much has to be done to engage our community in all aspects of our national security arrangements and thus education must begin in the schools and at home. There will also have to be more

¹ Sydney Morning Herald September 4, 2008. Anthony Bergin

advanced offerings available in all our educational institutions. I am pleased that our defence organization was able to show some leadership on this aspect through the public consultation process used in putting together the Defence White Paper 2000. This year we have used another public consultation process to inform the community about key judgments needed in the new defence white paper. Yet we still have a long way to go to reach a satisfactory result in this area.

My final pitch on national security reform concerns a topic that is just starting to emerge for debate in Australia. It concerns the question of national resilience and whether or not the community at large has the necessary resourcefulness and adaptability to deal with significant shocks and traumas. For example, a couple of years ago we observed in the aftermath of destruction caused by Cyclone Larry that there was a substantial number of people in the affected communities who were not capable of dealing with the consequences of disruptions to the normal community services such as power, water and supermarket shopping for food for up to 3 days. Similar stories in other natural disasters have caused some people to query the quality of our national resilience.

On national resilience a recent report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute makes a number of recommendations that would enhance our national security posture, mainly drawn from analysis of the effects of natural disasters. It reports that “the focus on disrupting the planning of terrorist acts, or to disrupt them once underway, has obscured the potential for much greater deaths and casualties caused by extreme natural disasters”.²

Further this report calls for an informed and prepared community that focuses on enabling communities to help themselves. I support the call to do more to consider how we might build a more resilient Australian society.

Finally, let me throw out one serious issue for consideration from my own experience in Australia. I have often wondered why almost every significant review and reform in my organization had to be conducted by outsiders. Why is it that we do not seem to possess the intellectual capacity or willingness to reform ourselves? Is this a fundamental failure of our own leadership to either see the need for change or to act? If so, then I believe that we must take urgent steps to resolve this inadequacy if we are to meet the challenges of national security reform adequately.

² ASPI Report No 39 of May 2008, p2