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Deterrence and the Relevance of Submarines

(*With acknowledgements* to Hew Strachan, Ruth Harris for their RAND paper: 'The Utility of Military Force and Public Understanding in Today's Britain'. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA213-1.html)

Social Acceptance (Licence) for Deterrence.

Assumptions.

Australian citizens, who are unconnected with military issues, are generally uncertain of the relevance of military deterrence to the freedoms and lifestyle in a democratic society. They tend to view the imposition of the costs of a defence force, via taxation, as excessive and doubt the cost effectiveness of the expenditure.

Introduction

This paper addresses a range of trends which go far beyond a series of quick solutions. Later in the paper recommendations assume that the public is reluctant to condone, and finds it hard to understand, government initiated debate on the utility of deterrence and of force.

Generally speaking, most concerns around national social resilience focus on natural events, such as extreme weather, with consequential bush fires and floods, rather than on national security issues involving deliberately malignant actors. Even when hostile intent is involved, the focus leads logically to actions that are not conventionally military, such as economic/political coercion and organised crime, requiring not the response of the defence forces specifically but of civil society as a whole. Moreover, the level of threat varies by business type, region and generation. Terrorism is a greater concern for urban populations; Bush fires, floods, droughts and wind damage may affect rural communities more. Business types covers agriculture and mining/export of raw materials. Our way of life in Australia relies on our maritime supply chains. Protection of those maritime resources requires military assets; these require pre-planned, long-term investment by the government (a form of national security insurance). Social acceptance (social licence) of such investments will lead to the social resilience of the nation only if the public are well informed on issues of national security and understand the costs and benefits involved. Governments generally are not proficient at engaging with the public on matters of national security.

Preamble

A compelling argument/engagement that creates awareness by the population, of the need for national security, creates a social licence for a level of protection as it reduces the returns on attacks by potential adversaries. Societal ownership itself underpins resilience. Social resilience comes after social acceptance has been achieved. If people accept a strategic direction, support it, then some will become involved in it (as in the incorporation of Reservists in military initiatives). Communities where people are involved and active become more resilient (such as in firefighting and other natural disaster areas) as they gain experience and knowledge. Then the whole community supports those who are involved and it itself becomes more resilient.

Communities are not homogenous and different views will be expressed; some people will change their minds on receipt of the information; social acceptance can only be achieved after considerable public engagement and when people understand the issues involved. The issues include benefits and burdens,

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advantages and disadvantages – and these need to be expressed openly. There will be a spectrum of perspectives ranging from "totally against"; somewhat against; neutral; no interest; somewhat in favour; very much in favour. Those on the extremes are unlikely to change their minds. In contrast people who are neutral and people who are quite uninformed should be the general target for the public engagement as they are likely to be the majority and could provide good support for the initiative. Public engagement in defence creates a level of mass participation, which itself leads to resilience. National service is the most obvious tool to achieve this effect. There are other methods – of which taxation and proper parliamentary accountability, are relevant. However, the most central method in Australia today is mass communication via the Internet, If the debate about strategy is conducted by elites and in ways which do not trust those charged with defence to address the public openly and sensibly, it will follow that the public will not have a proper understanding of the issues that govern the utility of (eg) submarines.

A lack of mature public engagement will result in a lack of public understanding, a lack of social acceptance (aka social licence), thus creating a lack of national, social resilience. For example, a promising tool for public engagement ought to be cybersecurity. Australia has been congratulated for its approach to cyber security and particularly for its attention to possible threats to critical national infrastructure. However, cybersecurity cannot just be left to government. The pervasive role of IT means that this form of security is an individual as well as collective responsibility, and the proliferation of 5G is going to intensify these issues. We need higher standards of cyber security across the entire telecommunications sector; arguably the market does not currently offer sufficient incentive for good cyber security.

The private sector and the wider public have crucial roles in responding to these calls. The pursuit of profit has to be tempered by the elevation of security, and the realisation that the neglect of the latter could itself erode the former.

However, the relationship of cyber security to the utility of military force is indirect. More direct resilience rests on the integration of the defence forces within the community, notably on direct evidence of their contribution to security (for example the incorporation of Reservists in security support at the local and regional level) in the recent natural bushfire and pandemic disasters**.** The defence forces themselves are wary of the role, and State Governments can be reluctant to admit that they need help.

Deterrence

The absence of social acceptance – with the effect of reducing domestic resilience - is to undermine deterrence. As with resilience, societal acceptance (social licence) strengthens deterrence. If the public don't understand what they are interested in defending or what they will fight for, then any potential adversary will assume that the democratic state will pursue every policy option short of conflict, but not conflict itself. The Argentinians made that assumption in 1982; Saddam Hussein did so twice over, in 1990 and 2003; and Putin continues to do so in Russia's 'near abroad'. Being forced to go to war, because deterrence has failed, may reinforce deterrence in the future - but at the significant price of deterrence failure in the short term.

The public debate on deterrence has never been particularly active in Australia and in UK has collapsed since the end of the Cold War.

In many cases, academics, who originally drove expert thinking, have moved on to other areas of study, and governments have become wary of encouraging debate on an issue which has a capacity to divide opinion. China's emergence as an increasing threat has, however, prompted recognition that deterrence has a part to play, the nervousness around its association with nuclear weapons has constrained the ways in which it has been articulated. Conventional deterrence is not a whole answer: it is part of wider deterrence, which, for western alliances, includes nuclear weapons.

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Engaging the Public.

On issues of a sensitive nature, on matters to do with the defence of the country, the Australian government is cautious of public opinion, and even public engagement. Defence White Papers and Defence Reviews have unclassified (released to the public) and classified (not released to the public) versions. It is not the first democratic government to confront this issue. Indeed, many democratic governments have been reluctant even to engage with the people's elected representatives, let alone the people themselves. Uninformed media estimations of costs are areas which confuse the public and conflict with the political 'duty of care' which should properly be a responsibility of government when explaining deterrence as a pillar of national security. By being too fearful of controversy (eg costs and other political overlaps) the government breaks the links between it, the defence forces and the people. The effective exclusion of the people from the making of national strategy can be addressed narrowly in the context of civil–military relations and their role in shaping policy and its use of force. But it is more than that. Particularly for a democratic state, civil–military relations do not exist in a self-contained compartment. That is partly because our understanding of national security has widened beyond the narrowly military domain, but also because ministers, the electorate and even the defence forces themselves do business in many environments other than that of traditional defence. The consideration of deterrence is one which which has an overarching impact on many of these issues.

There is a perception, via the media, that Australia's own sense of identity is being challenged by a depletion of sovereign control, border control and, some might argue, multiculturalism. Its form of democracy – upper and lower houses of elected representatives – is itself attacked as an elite, removed from the issues that shape thinking outside Canberra or from the needs of 'ordinary people'. The levels of literacy enjoyed by today's citizens are generally much higher than they were in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and they receive news (in many cases, of questionable reliability) at a speed and in a quantity/complexity which dwarf the circumstances in which the model of parliamentary government evolved.

Possible policy considerations

Emphasising the shared responsibility of resilience via the pursuit of a social licence (social acceptance):

Government strategic considerations should view national security as its central and unifying principle and should be reflected in the theme of resilience. This has - in part – been a response to the defence forces' role in counter-terrorism and in natural disaster relief. To some extent, it has had the effect of reconnecting the defence forces and the people, and it was a theme picked up by the press. Domestic security is everybody's business, partly because of terrorism but principally because of cyber, and so the responsibility for resilience is a shared one. Future strategic considerations need to make this point explicit.

"Creating coherence in communications:1

The immediate challenges facing public understanding of deterrence, via the utility of force, relate to perceptions generated by past and current middle eastern conflicts . However, media reporting in relation to Australian involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan was minimal (similarly in relation to assistance for Ukraine). More importantly, the public has lost all awareness of those 'wars of intervention' (eg. Rwanda) which have had some success. Any decision to use military force is inherently risky and morally fraught but it can be the right decision: the public needs to understand the issues. Below are some proposals for achieving this:

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[1] [1] Hew Strachan, Ruth Harris RAND paper: 'The Utility of Military Force and Public Understanding in Today's Britain'. Para 6.1 p29

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- *Tackle disinformation effectively*: A plan for tackling disinformation produced by external state actors and others is a critical objective. A National Security Strategic Review should reinforce such a commitment as 'an enhanced capability' to give senior officials 'access to a broad cross-government group of communications professionals who can work centrally or alongside them to achieve communications objectives as an integrated part of the government's approach to national security'.

- *The Fusion Doctrine*. A National Security Strategic Review could develop cross-governmental working by creating 'a more accountable system to support collective Cabinet decision-making'. It might focus on integrating the activities of different government departments. To that end, the UK uses senior responsible officers (SROs) to deliver particular parts of the government's package for national security. The public also has a place in the commitment to deliver national security objectives, and the National Security Council should nominate an SRO to deliver on that aim.

- *Decentralise and democratise defence communications*: The Department of Defence's communications with the public need to be opened up and decentralised. Members of the defence forces should be as free to use social media and similar platforms as other citizens. Those in uniform should be able to speak directly to the press and should receive training to do so. If they are trusted to use lethal force, they should be regarded as responsible enough to explain why they have done so. The public puts more faith in professional experts than in politicians. If the government is ready to allow the Chief Medical Officer to speak to the media about epidemiology, or senior police officers about violent crime, why is it reluctant to allow the senior members of the Defence Staff to speak about strategy, or a commanding officer to explain why somebody in his or her unit was killed? Having said this, seeking a balance in tensions between open communications and security considerations is not a trivial endeavour and will require careful management.

- *Track changes in data*: Polling data is collected for the Government and it differentiates the evidence it provides by age, gender, region, class and ethnicity. It would be sensible also to track changes over time, and to make this data available to others concerned with national security."

Submarine Capability and Presence as a Measure of Deterrence

Background[2]

Australia is an island trading nation connected to a global trading system by seabed cables and maritime commerce, defending our national interests means defending the international system that enables our economic prosperity, security, and well-being. This has been the status quo for Australia for nearly 80 years. We took for granted our shipping lines, our intact underwater sea cables and sub-surface pipelines and also adherence to a rules-based global order underpinned by international law.

But the status quo no longer applies. Australia's region, the Indo-Pacific, faces increasing competition that operates on multiple levels: economic, military and diplomatic. The Indo-Pacific is now home to the largest military buildup anywhere in the world in the last 70 years, and the development of these capabilities coincides with behaviors that do not reflect the rules-based global order. Australia's recent Defence Strategic Review was initiated in recognition of this change. China's 'Belt and Road' program has created a number of regional economic and diplomatic challenges.

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[2] CDRE Bradley Francis RAN– March 2024 US National Submarine League Journal.

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The review, and the government's response, recognise that, to defend Australia, Australia must expand investment in its defense capabilities now. We should deter, through presence and denial, any attempt to project military force (together with economic and diplomatic coercion) against Australia; to protect Australia's economic connection to our region and the world and contribute with our partners to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific. A contribution to the maintenance of a global rules-based order. The 2023 National Defence Statement from the Australian government states, "The government's immediate actions to reprioritize defence capabilities in line with the review's recommendations, include investing in conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS partnership."

From Australia's force structure perspective, an essential element of deterrence is undersea capability. Closing modern sea lanes and threatening undersea infrastructure would have a critical impact on Australia's economy and security - also that of our partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Reflecting on the importance of projecting a 'Presence' as a deterrent, Australia has prioritized the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines as a cornerstone of our military deterrence. Australia needs to maintain a capability advantage in that domain. The undersea environment is becoming increasingly contested and more challenging for us to secure our interests. As technology evolves, the ability of Australia's current diesel electric submarines, to operate in the environments that we need them to, will gradually diminish. Only conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) will meet Australia's defence requirements in the decades ahead.

Discussion

The Government should be prepared and pro-active in leading public debate on the strategic and tactical advantages offered by submarines. The Public needs to be encouraged towards understanding the deterrence value of submarines in the broader region and that the acquisition and operation of submarines has profound strategic benefits to the protection of Australia's maritime lifelines, inexorably linked to Australia's 'Way of Life'. An analogy for the cost (in taxes) of national security is the cost of an insurance premium to protect those aspects of Australian lifestyle seen to have value. The size of the premium reflects the potential risk to, and the estimated value of, what we seek to protect. There are further implications of this fundamental maritime reality in terms of submarine workforce expansion, sustainment infrastructure investment and continuous capability improvement.

The Government also needs to lead the debate in terms of the longer-term benefits of nuclear-powered submarines via the AUKUS Agreement. They offer a profound reduction in vulnerability (via radical advancements in stealth technology) together with the speed and endurance to match potential aggressors. Strategic submarine operations aligned with our major allies is a critical issue.

Engendering clarity and transparency regarding Australia's Submarine Capability.

Defence strategy needs to be explicit about the capabilities for which its submarines are configured. The decision to engage in a conflict is rarely a binary choice between war and peace, as current practice makes clear. However, not all use of submarine capability involves the employment of weapons. Submarines can be used with varying degrees of covert utility, to influence, to monitor, to coerce, to contain, to deter, to covertly insert/extract Special Forces, to limit, as well as to defeat or to annihilate. However, their most profound capability in the execution of all these roles is stealth: their ability to operate in areas in which no control is held over the air or maritime environment and remain undetected.
In situations of heightened tension, diplomacy should always offer the better route forward, especially given a hope to avoid armed conflict entirely or to contain it if it is employed. Submarines are a significant factor in the containment of escalating circumstances; their capability and presence can underpin diplomatic negotiations, reducing the risk of deterioration towards armed conflict. Australia cannot fight a major

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conflict on its own, and politicians need the vocabulary of diplomacy to explain the very different sorts of submarine operations which Australia is equipped to undertake today. The public needs to understand that.

Narratives which explain to the public how, why and where Australia might use submarines, and which capabilities it might use, should be developed. Although necessarily constructed around hypothetical situations, they can make concrete what might otherwise seem abstract or aspirational, and so deepen public understanding.

Conclusion.

Development of an Australian concept of deterrence has been neglected by the media. The public generally doesn't understand the concept of deterrence as a measure of National Security, nor the role to be played by submarines, Special Forces and other specialised strategic military capabilities, in such deterrence.

The ADF has failed to deliver on empathy as opposed to sympathy and of late has become disproportionately concerned with the past rather than with the present and future. According to opinion polls, 65 per cent of the public in UK know little or nothing of the defence forces. A similar percentage almost certainly prevails in Australia. The Government needs to promote understanding of today's defence forces via contemporary forms of direct public engagement.