Two Imperatives for Building Cooperative Regional Relationships

Professor John Langmore
Associate Director, Research: Security & Political Engagement
Melbourne School of Government
Two Imperatives for Building Cooperative Regional Relationships

Professor John Langmore
Associate Director, Research: Security & Political Engagement
Melbourne School of Government

Public Policy in the ‘Asian Century’ Conference, 9 December 2013
Two Principal Themes

1. Australian actions influence the economic, social, environmental, political and strategic evolution of the region.

   Therefore preparation of Australian public policy will most effectively reflect Australian long term interests when it not only takes account of its direct impact on Australians but also of its likely indirect effects through the consequences for, and responses of, other countries in the region.

2. Defence policy is part of foreign policy and they should therefore be integrated rather than being placed in separate silos.
Major lowering of Australian trade protection is generally considered to have improved the average purchasing power of Australian consumers by reducing prices of imports.

This benefit is generally considered to have more than offset the damage to the international competitive position of Australian manufacturers.

This net benefit has been enhanced by the encouragement which the lowering of Australian protection has given to other countries in the region to also reduce their protection.

This happens in part through bilateral trade agreements such as that concluded last week with South Korea.

Australian openness to trade has increased the economic integration of the region and the capacity for regional economic cooperation.
There are likely to be similar benefits from applying this approach to strategic relations.

Australian military strategy influences that of other regional powers. Australian military spending does not only prepare Australia to defend itself: it is also a factor in the decisions of other countries about the level of their military expenditure.

The extent of this impact is likely to differ between countries, and its overall significance is the subject of debate, but it would be negligent to neglect it.

China’s protests about the major increases in military spending and new weapons purchases in the 2009 Defence White Paper (WP) are an example of this impact.
Internationally the traditional concept of state-based military power utilised in order to pursue the politics of national interest has largely been supplanted by the view that war is a threat to national interests.

An example is the Report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), which argued that ‘The downside risks of waging aggressive war in a globalized interdependent world are seen today as outweighing almost any conceivable benefit’.

The contemporary concern for human security leads to more complex expectations of military forces than did previous frameworks.

There is a strong case for Australia’s defence planners to temper their Realist assumptions with the greater sophistication and complexity inherent in contemporary approaches to security.
The evolving norm of the Responsibility to Protect elevates the importance of human rights in international relations.

The Responsibility to Prevent conflict is the fundamental aspect of the Responsibility to Protect.

The involvement of western military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan did not engage with these concepts. These campaigns were a highly militarised form of political intervention and were beset by practical failure.

The difference in style between these interventions and Australia’s efforts in Timor Lesté and the Solomon Islands is marked. These involved a degree of consensus with the UN and regional governments.

A major determining consideration in Australia’s defence planning should be contingencies of these kinds.
The Minister’s Preface to the 2009 White Paper began: ‘There is no greater responsibility for a national government than the defence of the nation, its people and their interests.’

Protection from external threats is one aspect of national and personal security but so are economic stability, opportunities for employment, environmental sustainability, high quality health and education services, safety on the streets and much more.

The Minister’s claim exaggerates the importance of defence in peacetime and lays a foundation for the misleadingly narrow analysis which characterised the White Paper.
Stephen Smith began more modestly in the 2013 WP: ‘One of the fundamental responsibilities of any Australian Government is to protect and defend our people …’

The 2013 WP is a significantly less provocative statement than the 2009 WP, but it defines national security interests as ‘based on protecting Australia’s sovereignty – which includes freedom from coercion by other states ... and shaping a favourable international environment’.

But it has only two paragraphs on how to do the latter (3.23 and 3.24), and nothing about means of identifying the causes of disputes or of non-military means of reducing tension or attempting to resolve conflict.

The goal of peace is mentioned but not discussed. That is, foreign and defence policy continue to be treated as virtually separate silos.
Towards a Research Agenda for Public Policy in the ‘Asian Century’

Dangers of a defence silo

This conventional thinking makes a fundamental misjudgement in treating defence as a silo remote from other aspects of foreign policy.

The isolation of military strategy undermines discussion of the relative priority and weight given to all aspects of foreign policy including:

- Bilateral and regional relations
- Political contact and discussions
- Preventive diplomacy
- Multilateral engagement
- Peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace-building, especially negotiation, mediation and conciliation
- Development policy including official development assistance (ODA)
- International economic, financial, social, human rights and environmental relations
- Global governance including its economic, social and environmental dimensions
AITAC articulates in broad terms the approach which is required:

‘Australia’s future is irrevocably tied to the stability and sustainable security of our diverse region. Australia has much to offer through cooperation with other nations to support sustainable security in the region. We will work to build trust and cooperation, bilaterally and through existing regional mechanisms. We will continue to support a greater role for Asian countries in a rules-based regional and global order.’

It commits to ‘more intensive diplomacy across Asia’ spanning business, unions, community groups and educational and cultural institutions’.
National Objective 20:

‘Australian policies will contribute to Asia’s development as a region of sustainable security in which habits of cooperation are the norm.’

Pathways include:

• Promotion of cooperation between major powers
• Promote fair representation of Asian nations in multilateral organisations
• Prepare a new Defence White Paper informed by AITAC
• Support security frameworks and norms based on UN Charter
Article 1 of the Charter describes the first purpose of the UN as being:

‘To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and the removal of threats, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace’.

That is, membership of the UN requires countries to attempt by all reasonable means to minimise and avoid the use of force and to seek non-violent means of minimising and resolving conflict.

Article 33 commits member states which are a party to any dispute ‘the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security [to] first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice’.
Chapter VI and VII set out the goals and means by which the Security Council and the General Assembly are to work for resolution of conflict, including, only as a last resort, through action including the use of force.

Neither WP mention that the number of military conflicts and in the numbers of war deaths since the start of the 1990s has declined substantially. There are many reasons for this striking improvement, including:

• the end of colonialism and of the Cold War;
• the decline in the number of authoritarian governments
• the growth of economic interdependence; and
• a major increase in the international effort through the UN, a number of countries, and of NGOs concentrating on preventing, managing and resolving conflicts.
Figure 1.
Number of armed conflicts by type, 1946-2011
AITAC puts Australian security in perspective.

China and some other countries in the region in which incomes are growing rapidly are modernising their defence forces.

But US military expenditure continues to ‘dwarf’ those of other countries.

Rapid growth of economic interdependence is strengthening the imperative for cooperation and negotiated settlement of political conflicts. ‘All the major powers recognise how interdependent their economic interests are’. ‘All the major Asian states will have a deep interest in avoiding armed conflict’.

That is why mechanisms for strategic and economic dialogue have recently been so substantially improved.

‘In managing the intersections of Australia’s ties with the US and China, we will need a clear sense of our national interests, a strong voice in both relationships and effective diplomacy’.
Preventive diplomacy by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is our first line of defence. Yet that Department currently receives only about 3 per cent of national security spending.

The 2013-14 defence budget of $25.4 billion is 6.5 per cent of the Commonwealth’s expenditure, 75 per cent of national security spending, the rest being aid, Federal police, the intelligence agencies and DFAT.

Both recent Labor and Coalition governments have failed to adequately support Australia’s preventive diplomacy. Australia now has fewer overseas posts than any other member of the G20 and fewer than we had in 1995. So implementing the AITAC White Paper requires increased funding for DFAT.

Neglecting DFAT is to neglect Australia’s security interests and to consign diplomacy to a minor role in defending them.
The 2013 WP discusses ordering three squadrons of Joint Strike Fighters (JSF), about 72 planes rather than the 100 proposed in 2009.

The JSF is ‘the most expensive weapons system ever built’. The current ‘flyaway’ price is US $154m per jet and this continues to rise as orders by US and foreign forces continue to be cut.

The JSF has been ‘plagued by a risky development strategy, shoddy management, laissez-faire oversight, countless design flaws, and skyrocketing costs’.

Arguably the JSF has become cost-ineffective because they are being replaced by drones. They may also not be suitable for Australia’s needs: for example their range may be too limited.

Further reduction or cancelling the order would also reduce a major provocation to other countries in the region.
The first Rudd Government arbitrarily announced in the 2009 Defence WP that Australia would build 12 submarines. The 2013 WP simply asserted that ‘Due to the strategic value and importance of Australia’s submarine capability, the Government remains committed to replacing the existing Collins Class fleet with an expanded fleet of 12 conventional submarines’

No justification for 12 was given. Nor was the possibility of fewer discussed.

Some commentators argue that six would be sufficient. There have been major problems with those currently in service. At one point in 2009 only one was capable of sea duty. They have been difficult to staff.

Given fiscal constraints, the current rationale is unpersuasive.
Conclusion: Building regional security

Australia has a long-standing commitment to active middle-power diplomacy.

That is being demonstrated effectively at present through our elected membership of the UN Security Council. (NB the Arms Trade Treaty and resolution on Small Arms and Light Weapons)

Building cooperative bilateral relationships is centrally important.

Building dialogue also requires strengthening the UN and other global and regional organisations such as the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus.

Confidence-building measures through increased defence cooperation, improved communication and greater transparency are important.

Building human security – seeking a just international order as the basis for a peaceful one.
Two Imperatives for Building Cooperative Regional Relationships

Professor John Langmore
Associate Director, Research: Security & Political Engagement
Melbourne School of Government

government.unimelb.edu.au