SUBMISSION TO THE DEFENCE WHITE PAPER 2015

A PLEA FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

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I thank the Department of Defence for the opportunity to comment on Australian defence policy. I consent to the publication of this submission.

Summary

Current defence policy rests on the presupposition that Australia’s security relies on the nation integrating deeply with the US military, and establishing itself as a ‘superior’ regional military power.

I believe that costs of current policy outweigh the benefits. The government’s tolerance for the costs of the policy lead me to describe its commitment to building military power as a form of militarism. While I know the authors of the DWP will not agree with this point of view, I ask them to 1) endeavor to produce a document that gives the policy a reasonable level of public accountability by acknowledging the costs—economic, social, environmental, political and strategic—and showing why they consider the benefits outweigh costs; and 2) recommend to the Minister for Defence that he commission appropriate researchers (outside the traditional security community) to produce a critical analysis of the finalised DWP.

In this submission, I discuss one area of cost only: the damage being done by Australia’s new militarism to its capacity to act for global peace and human rights. A great deal more than my words here needs to be said about this cost and the many other costs of current defence policy.
Without an open explicit policy document that community members can engage with, the comprehensive wide ranging debate on defence that Australia urgently needs is unlikely to happen.

**Introduction**

It is regrettable that the public consultation process for the Defence White Paper 2015 (DWP) has repeated the history of previous such processes by failing to ignite wide ranging comprehensive open debate so urgently needed for the development of defence policy appropriate for Australia. Inevitably, the DWP will be faithful to the government’s quest for technological superiority and interoperability with the USA.

In the Defence Issues Paper, pertinent questions are asked but it is clear from the Paper’s body text that basic assumptions informing current policy are not open to debate. The make-up of the Expert Panel, recent media releases, ongoing procurements and the Prime Minister’s eagerness to re-deploy Australian forces to Iraq confirm that the basic policy is set in concrete.

All of the following will remain unchecked and unbeated: Australia’s deepening integration with the US military—in policy as well as technologically and operationally; increasing US use of ADF training bases, Australian ports and airfields, Australian-located spy and space communication bases; growth in the ADF’s off-shore force projection and global reach capabilities; militarisation of what should be civilian responsibilities, such as the response to asylum seekers arriving by boat; realisation of the government’s ambition to double military spending within ten years; and growth in the Department of Defence’s close and weakly regulated relationship with the world’s prime arms corporations.
Given that the DWP is to be produced without the benefit of a fundamental debate, I ask policy makers that an effort be made to improve the accountability of the government’s defence policy by giving a critique of their reasoning behind the policy they develop and, in the process, acknowledging actual and potential costs. Further, a recommendation to the Minister for Defence should be made to commission an independent analysis of the costs entailed by the finalised DWP.

**US Alliance**

Australian governments of both hues habitually describe Australia’s military relationship with the United States as one of cooperation. However, it has long outgrown mere cooperation: Australia’s relationship with the US is one of deep integration. Richard Tanter calls the relationship one of “misplaced hyper-integration” and spotlights the need for a re-assessment of “the strategic grand bargain” Australia has made with the US.¹ The ‘bargain’ is costing us dearly: strategically, politically, economically, socially and environmentally.

I haven’t time, space nor the talent to do justice to all these costs. In the following paragraphs, I attempt to describe some consequences of Australia’s seemingly frantic commitment to military power to the nation’s responsibilities to promote global peace and human rights.

The US Alliance has always cost us our strategic independence, as former PM Malcolm Fraser has recently argued, but what has become obvious is that our

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dependence on the US is now costing us our moral agency. We have allowed our military to put itself above international humanitarian law by, for example, supporting our allies in the mistreatment of prisoners of war and in extrajudicial killing of suspected terrorists. Australia’s commitment to nuclear disarmament, long compromised by our claim to a place under the US nuclear umbrella, is now drained of credibility by our participation in the USA’s ballistic missile defence program, a program aimed at giving the US first-strike capacity against China.

Recent US military moves, including the so-called ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific, military assistance to Taiwan, build-up of the US base in Guam, intentions to base AWDs at Sth Korea’s new Jeju naval base and support for Japan’s re-militarisation, strongly signify a policy to militarily contain China. Many commentators, including Chinese government officials, see the matter this way.

Australia’s integration with the USA makes us, in the words of former PM, Malcolm Fraser, “the southern linchpin in US containment of China”. This not only threatens Australia’s relationship with China but seriously undermines regional peace and stability.

Militarised Australia

Australia’s ambition to maintain military superiority in the region and force interoperability with the US not only limits our potential to work compatibly with the armed forces of our neighbours but incites suspicion, hostility and misunderstandings. It also feds regional arms competition, diverting resources from human need in a part of the world that has 757 million people living in extreme poverty (> $1 a day); poverty is a major source of conflict.
Protection of overseas ‘national interests’ is often used to justify big defence spending and acquisition of ‘off-shore power projection’ and ‘global reach’ capacities. In the Issues Paper, it is even suggested that we need an ADF with the power not only to protect our overseas national interests but to advance them: “Today, Australia’s defence policies must deliver on ADF that can effectively protect Australia from direct attack, of whatever form, and is also able to secure and advance our interests” (p6). Elsewhere in the Paper, a particularly alarming comment is made: “Our strategic outlook suggests that Defence needs to more actively be engaged in shaping our region to suit Australian interests in the short to medium term.” (p19)

It is more than time that Defence specify what national interests are under, or at risk of, the sort of attack that is appropriate for our armed force to deter or confront. Which of our national interests can be/should be advanced militarily? I contend that an armed forces with the capacity to shape our world to better suit our interests is an armed force with dangerously excessive power. If Australia uses its military power as a source of influence or means to further our interests, it is guilty of abuse of power.

The Issues Paper offers a vague list of the ADF’s off-shore responsibilities: “…protection of our trade routes, and prevention of non-geographic threats, such as those from cyberspace, terrorism, transnational crime, people smuggling and illegal fishing”. To what extent are these legitimate military responsibilities? If they are, do they warrant the off-shore power projection that the ADF is acquiring? Our trade routes and cyber space are not ‘ours’; they are shared not purely national interests. Their protection is strictly a multilateral matter, and Australia’s assumption that their protection is a unilateral or bilateral (US-
Australian) responsibility is an obstacle to Australian participation in the multilateral cooperation that freedom of the high seas demands. The rest of listed matters—terrorism, transnational crime, people smuggling and illegal fishing—are criminal matters and the domain of police forces, domestic or international. Empowering armed forces to assume civilian policing responsibilities is a threat to the very democracy and human rights that make our nation worth protecting.

**Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief**

According to the Issues Paper, an important question for the DWP is “the balance of emphasis between bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation.” It would be more pertinent to ask how Australia’s hyper-integration with the US military curtails Australia’s ability to pursue and promote non-military, as well as military, multilateral cooperation. Coinciding with Australia’s military build-up and deepening relationship with the US, stagnation has occurred in our capacity to respond effectively and cooperatively with our neighbours in times of disaster. Defence’s focus is expansion and upgrade of its offensive capabilities—it is not surprising that humanitarian response has take a very distant back seat.

Government announcements of major additions to Australian military power, whether ‘force multipliers’ through the US alliance or new procurements, are often accompanied by claims that the addition will increase ADF capacities to deliver humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR). However, regional disasters such as the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, Queensland floods and the MH370 tragedy, all found the ADF unprepared.

Australia’s failure to build a strong working relationship with Indonesian emergency services led to unnecessary high loss of life among boat people, a
situation that the government then exploited by instigating Operations Sovereign Borders. No effort or expense has been spared in equipping the RAN to take punitive action against asylum seekers, a shameful contrast to the unsuccessful under-equipped search and rescue efforts that had taken place in preceding years.

Along with the militarisation of our borders, we now face the prospect of our far-off territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Island being converted to military bases. Could not DWP authors consider the ‘human’ value of locating centres of regional cooperation on these territories: centres to do with HADR or marine science or some other civilian undertaking that would benefit the region?

The government’s zeal to take military action alongside its reluctance to meet its humanitarian responsibilities portrays a dangerous imbalance in foreign policy. The government’s refusal to send on-ground assistance requested by Ebola-devastated West African while at the same time deploying 600 military personnel and 8 bombers, costing $400 million, to the latest US led military intervention of Iraq is the most recent example of this imbalance. Defence agreements with the US have proliferated in recent years, yet it was the lack of a HADR agreement with the US concerning evacuating sick Australian aid workers that was the excuse used by the government for not sending desperately needed aid to West Africa.

The intensity and frequency of disasters are increasing. The DWP should seriously consider the need to place all HADR services under civilian control. This would require adequate funding being diverted from the defence budget, and the secondment of defence personnel to civilian HADR agencies for training in support roles. Training would include international HADR exercises and programs,
ensuring Australia has capacity to work closely and cooperatively with other countries in times of disaster.

Conclusion

The costs, actual and potential, of Australian militarism are immense. It is hard to see how the two justifications of the US alliance that Australian governments appeal to, and are re-iterated in the Issues Paper—access to US intelligence and technology—counterbalance the costs.

Those who argue that Australia requires ‘superior’ military power often claim it is necessary for deterrence and to win international credibility and influence. The DWP needs to show what threats exactly are being deterred. It also needs to consider whether Australia is losing more credibility and influence by sacrificing its independence on the altar of the US Alliance and exchanging its humanity for militarism.