Australia’s defence diplomacy: Time for a stocktake

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Executive Summary

- Defence diplomacy has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially amongst the great powers of the Asia-Pacific.
- Australia has a long and important history conducting defence diplomacy, but an assessment is needed of the effectiveness and value for money from some of these efforts.
- Ultimately a stocktake would be the first step to developing a clear strategy for Australian defence diplomacy and its place in national strategic policy.

Once seen as lying towards the softer end of the spectrum of strategic activity in the Asia-Pacific, defence diplomacy has been taking on a much harder edge in recent years. The region’s great powers are increasingly using a range of defence diplomatic techniques to advance their strategic agendas.

Speaking at the May 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a more Asia-centric approach to security and a redrawing of the region’s multilateral architecture along such lines. Consistent with this, Beijing is currently developing its own version of one of Asia’s leading forums for defence diplomacy, the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Not to be outdone, Tokyo has been loosening longstanding restrictions on the provision of military equipment to other countries – another form of defence diplomacy – to support its assembly of a counterbalancing coalition in the face of China’s rise. The United States too is employing defence diplomacy to buttress its own Asian rebalancing strategy, as epitomised by the rotation of marines through facilities in the north of Australia and the training they undertake with regional friends and partners during the course of their rotation.

Australian interest in defence diplomacy as a means for furthering strategic objectives in the region goes back much further than these recent developments. During the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Canberra provided considerable defence aid to a number of countries in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.

Yet despite this longstanding tradition, it is far from clear that Australian defence diplomacy has always been sufficiently strategic. Writing in the mid-1990s during the last significant burst of Australian enthusiasm for defence diplomacy, Desmond Ball and Pauline Kerr characterised these efforts as ‘presumptive.’ They argued that Canberra lacked a clear and coherent strategy to guide them. And they called upon the government to undertake a stocktake of Australia’s defence diplomacy with a view to addressing these problems and to ensure that such efforts were constructive in the future.

It seems prudent today to reflect upon the advice proffered by Ball and Kerr, particularly at a time when defence diplomacy is clearly coming back into fashion. The Australian Department of Defence might usefully consider undertaking a stocktake of the kind they suggest. Such a stocktake could begin by looking at what aspects of defence diplomacy are best serving Australia’s interests. One positive example here might be Canberra’s commitment to the Shangri-La Dialogue. The benefits that Canberra derives from its prominent participation in this gathering seem relatively clear cut. The Dialogue certainly serves as an exercise in efficiency for Australian defence officials and military practitioners. At the 2011 Shangri-la Dialogue, for instance, the Australian Defence Minister met bilaterally with counterparts from 14 other countries. The Dialogue also provides an additional opportunity for Canberra to coordinate with its allies and to signal common positions. Australia participated in trilateral Defence Ministerial talks with the US and Japan on the sidelines of the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue and issued a joint statement expressing their opposition to the use of coercion or force to alter the status quo in the East and South China Seas.

At the same time, a stocktake of Australia’s defence diplomacy could also illuminate enduring practices that are perhaps no longer delivering as well as they could. One area that might warrant closer attention, is the Defence Cooperation...
Scholarship Program. Under this scheme, funding is provided to support approximately 70 foreign officers while they study in Australia. These scholarships have been taken up across a range of universities where recipients have chosen to study an even broader array of subjects – including Engineering, International Relations, Human Rights Law and Policy, Strategic Studies, Education and Information Technology.

Is this highly disaggregated, demand-driven approach optimal or might Australian strategic objectives be better realised through a more coherent, focused program where scholarship recipients undertake their studies as a single cohort, attending the same institution and as part of a specialised, elite program?

Beyond an assessment of what is and what is not currently working, a stocktake of Australia’s defence diplomacy could also identify potential gaps in Asia’s evolving security architecture that Canberra might productively fill.

The relatively new ASEAN Defence Minister’s Plus (ADMM+) could be a particularly opportune target of opportunity. In particular, it does not yet have a dedicated Track 2 process through which new, fresh thinking from the non-official sector – academics, think tankers, journalists and the like – can be fed up to the official level in a structured way. Many if not most of Asia’s other leading multilateral processes have such arrangements in place.

Care would of course need to be taken to avoid any arousing of regional sensitivities here, particularly given the reticence towards Australia that was created not all that long ago as a result of the Rudd government’s ill-fated Asia-Pacific community initiative of 2008.

That said, provided the idea for a new second track grouping was taken forward in close collaboration with other like-minded partners, particularly from Southeast Asia, this is a gap that Canberra might usefully seek to fill. The history of Australian participation in the formation of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) during the 1990s – a grouping which became the official Track 2 analogue for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – provides a useful precedent.

The above list of suggestions is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. While it is often claimed that the benefits of defence diplomacy are largely intangible and thus difficult to quantify, the above analysis demonstrates that it is possible to make judgments about which aspects of Australia’s defence diplomacy are serving Canberra well, which are not optimal and what more might be done. The advantage of undertaking a thorough stocktake of Australia’s defence diplomacy along these lines is that such an assessment can then also provide the basis for a more coherent strategy of the kind that Ball and Kerr charged was missing during the 1990s.

**Policy Recommendation**

Australia should conduct a thorough stocktake of its defence diplomacy. A public document with the findings should be published as a way to build domestic and regional support for further defence diplomacy initiatives.

**Endnotes**

1 Zhang Yu, ‘Xi defines new Asian security vision at CICA’, *Global Times*, 22 May 2014.
5 For further reading see Desmond Ball, *Building Blocks for Regional Security: An Australian Perspective on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) in the Asia/Pacific Region*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence no.83, (Canberra, ACT: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1991).
8 For further reading on the Defence Scholarship Program see Sam Bateman, Anthony Bergin and Hayley Channer, ‘Terms of engagement: Australia’s regional defence diplomacy’, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 2013.