Submission to the 2015 Defence White Paper - Defence Diplomacy: A tool for security, not strategy

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- Defence Diplomacy is very useful at solving specific security/capability problems
- Defence Diplomacy is unhelpful, even counterproductive on strategic order issues
- A focused whole-of-government based on a clear public strategy is needed

Defence diplomacy (DD) has rapidly expanded in significance and prestige in recent years. This is welcome given regional security tensions, however the Australian Government needs to be careful in how it understands and uses DD. A survey of the Australian and regional experience suggests DD is a tactical rather than strategic tool. It can be very profitably used to address immediate security issues or build specific capabilities in the region, but should not be expected to be change the strategic orientation of the region — that is the political alignment and decisions on when and where to use or endorse the use of force by other states.

There are a number of examples of successful use of DD by Australia in recent years. The most well-known and celebrated example is the use of long standing defence relations between Australia’s ADF and the Indonesia TNI to manage the 1999 arrival of INTERFET forces into East Timor without conflict. Similarly Australia’s Pacific Partnership and Render Safe Operations have been widely praised.

Yet to understand INTERFET’s unfettered arrival in Indonesia, defence diplomacy was only one small part of the solution. Far more significant was the political pressure on the Indonesian leadership the United Nations, Australia and the United States. The arrival was made easier by the TNI’s communication and engagement with Australian troops, but this is DD solving a specific issue — how to manage the safe movement of troops — rather than changing whether Indonesia was willing to use force. Likewise Pacific Partnership and Render Safe address specific regional challenges are being addressed through the provision of resources (such as the HADR and UXO equipment), skills and training (using and maintaining equipment), and improved sharing of intelligence, communication. The success of these operations is their focus on specific problems and access to the key individuals who can achieve the required changes. So while DD can operate at the security end of the spectrum, scepticism must be applied to the claim it can operate at the strategic end.

Australia should therefore continue to invest in DD, but be practical about how and where it is applied. DD is most effective as a way of influencing specific military leaders and the types of decisions they can influence — such as building habits of cooperation, dealing with non-traditional security challenges, improving capability and defence transparency. Looking at Australia’s most important relationship with Indonesia, Defence Diplomacy could be very effectively used to help address specific regional challenges. Peter Jennings’ suggestion1 of joint intelligence cooperation on maritime areas and providing two of Australia’s ANZAC class frigates to Indonesia is the type of practical effort the literature

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1 Jennings, Peter - Australia’s golden opportunity to reconcile with Indonesia 17 October – AFR.com
http://www.afr.com/p/special_reports/opportunityasia/australia_golden_opportunity_to_685EgqL0FCw9sHuN254QcL
shows Defence Diplomacy can excel at. An Indonesia which can manage its maritime zone is a valuable and important goal, and far more realistic than misplaced ambitions of using DD to somehow change Indonesia’s political alignment.

DD is far less effective is when it is used as a replacement for political diplomacy, or presumed that good relations between military officials can change the alignment and strategy of their nations. DD will never be enough to push Indonesia or India from their historic preference for non-alignment, persuade China to moderate its territorial claims or solve the many historic disputes between the countries of the East and South China Sea. Recent experience suggests such weighty expectations on Defence Diplomacy could even be counterproductive. The prestige and pressure of the Shangri-La Dialogue has led to military leaders being forced to simply repeat — even embolden — the rhetoric of their political leadership, wasting any potential for greater understanding or more private compromises as advocates of DD regularly promise. It is only recently that DD has expanded from being used on practical issues in cooperation with allies to its new form as a solution for regional tension, and there is little evidence to support the expanded potential.2

For Australia, such lofty expectations for DD can be similarly unhelpful. The 2013 Defence White Paper has such an expansive discussion of DD that almost any activity with any country in the world could be justified under its scope3. The document also sets a goal of using DD to ‘consolidate habits of cooperation and dialogue as the norm’4 but without specifying exactly what the norm desired is or how it might be achieved. While DD is cheaper than other activities, it is not free and there is a big opportunity cost wasting the time and talents of military officials pursuing goals that are not viable.

There also needs to be a clear and public strategy against which ADF activities can be measured, the efforts of other departments integrated and the public brought on side. This requires an expanded DFAT (which would cost a fraction of the abstract and unhelpful 2% of GDP pledge for Defence5), as well as coordinated efforts with PM&C, Attorney-Generals and any departments with relevant and valuable expertise or capacity, such as Agriculture. The United Kingdom’s model of government integration on behalf of engagement has been rightly praised and could serve as a useful exemplar6.

Australia’s defence engagement be focused on short term security objectives rather than unrealistic hopes for strategic change. Addressing existing transnational security challenges and reducing the likelihood of future security issues emerging would have obvious long term implications for the regional environment and help support movement towards the strategic objectives identified in the 2013DWP.

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3 DOD, 2013 Defence White Paper (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia) p. 55-68
4 DOD, 2013 Defence White Paper (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia) p. 55