

A Vision for Australia

From military security



The last hundred years have seen two world wars, nuclear arsenals that threaten total annihilation and a succession of bloody military interventions, civil wars and genocidal campaigns.

It is time to rethink what we mean by security. Our key concern should be the security needs of persons, communities and nature rather than the security needs of military establishments.

Our focus must be human security not military security.

The words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres bear repeating:

We must put people at the centre of our actions . . . We must break down siloes across sectors and institutions . . . We must boost inclusive partnerships that benefit from the perspectives of youth, women, and those whose voices are rarely heard, such as indigenous peoples.

In Australia's case, security policy is deeply rooted in the history that begins with European settlement. Until we come to terms with that history, a vision of human security will elude us.

Colonialism: Its enduring legacy

European settlers and their masters knew little or nothing of the traditions, lifestyles or wisdom of the original inhabitants, and had little or no affinity with the much larger Asian populations located in their immediate neighbourhood.

White Australia felt as far as it is possible to be from kith and kin, whereas strangers and potential enemies appeared uncomfortably close.

Sustaining and justifying the imperial enterprise was a deep-seated superiority complex that derided the peoples, cultures, and religions of the non-Western world. The stated purpose of colonial rule was to "civilise" the non-European.

To human security



UN Human Security Photos

The colonisers thus felt entitled, some would say duty bound, to impose their cultural values and administrative, economic and educational practices on the colonised.

Australia's colonial history is one of invasion, the 'frontier wars', dispossession, assimilation, nuclear tests on Indigenous land, and the steadfast refusal of the colonisers to value wisdom of the First Nations, especially their attachment to and respect for Country. *They were effectively dehumanised.*

Nor does the process of dehumanisation stop there. Colonialism requires the domination of one people by another. *In that profound sense, it decivilises and dehumanises the coloniser.*

Racism and addiction to threats and empire

The colonially inspired racism that has underpinned our attitudes to Indigenous Australia has also impacted deeply our relations with non-Western peoples in our region.

The White Australia policy was eventually set aside in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it remains well and truly alive in our asylum seeker and refugee policies, in relations with our First Nations, in our treatment of migrants of colour and, as we shall see, in our diplomacy and military alignments.

Contemporary Australia has yet to reconcile its history and geography.

Since Federation Australia's political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence elites have been addicted to the military power associated with Western imperial centres.

Almost every time Australia has gone to war, it has been in support of the imperial power, be it Britain or the United States – often in distant conflicts which had little to do with Australia's security interests.

Australia at War since 1899

Boer War: 1899–1902	Vietnam War: 1962–1975
World War I: 1914–1918	Gulf War: 1991
World War II: 1939–1945	Afghanistan War: 2001–2021
Korean War: 1950–1953	Iraq War: 2003–11
Malayan Emergency: 1948–1960	Operation against ISIL: 2014–present
Indonesian Confrontation: 1962–1966	

Closely related to 'dependence on great and powerful friends' has been the fixation on threats.

From the early 1950s right through to the mid-1980s, the 'Communist threat' theme dominated. This was the main justification given for the ANZUS alliance (signed in 1951) and for membership of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954.

Once the Cold War ended, the Islamist and Chinese threats soon replaced the Soviet or Communist threat.

Following the events of September 2001, Australia's response to the terrorism was dictated largely by Washington.

We joined US-led military missions in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and enacted draconian legislation at home – all in the name of national security. Loss of life, war crimes, erosion of civil liberties, decisions made in secrecy, lack of accountability were all part of the price we had to pay.

The orchestration of the 'China threat' has followed a similar pattern. China has been fiercely criticised for expanding its military capability. The Chinese defence budget, it is true, has steadily increased, reaching USD 292 billion in 2022, but still well below the US defence budget \$877 billion in that year.

The possibility that the Chinese navy might gain access to one or two ports or basing facilities in the Asia-Pacific region is viewed with alarm. That the United States has over 750 bases in more than 70 countries is regarded as normal.

Since 1949 China has engaged in combat on a few occasions. The main ones are: Korean war (1950-53), the brief war against India (1962), and the punitive action against Vietnam (1979).

By contrast, In the 20th century, the US engaged in 38 armed conflicts, averaging one every three years, and since 2000 in at least 11 wars, or one every two years.

A sprawling US led security establishment

Since September 2001, Australian governments have used the terrorist and Chinese threats to justify an ever expanding security apparatus.

Australia is now engaged in the biggest expansion of its long-range capabilities since World War II. In 2020 Prime Minister Morrison announced \$270 billion in additional military spending over the next decade. The recently announced nuclear powered submarine program will cost another some \$368 billion.

For 2023-24 the budget allocation for defence and ASD is \$52.6 billion, up from \$21.7 billion in 2009-2010. Over the last 10 years the funding allocation for ASIO has risen from \$346 million to \$828 million. Over the same period, funding for the Australian Secret Intelligence Service has risen from \$247 million to \$641 million.

In addition to this vast costly security establishment, the manipulation of our security fears has meant:

- Toeing the US line on China, Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, and other major conflicts
- Troubling levels of interoperability with the US military
- Rapidly expanding military exercises with the US
- Establishment of the AUKUS security partnership
- Frenetic efforts to ensure the Pacific Islands remain firmly within the US/Australian strategic orbit
- A large US military footprint across Australia.



Source: OperationMilitaryKids.org

*The costs have been high,
the benefits few and far between.*

A MORE PROMISING FUTURE

The priority must be the security needs of people not the security interests of military establishments. Our ears must be attuned to the cries of the poor and the cries of the Earth.

We need to integrate security with economic and social wellbeing, human rights and environmental values.

Australia must move towards a holistic approach which:

- Acknowledges and seeks to heal the wounds of Indigenous dispossession and colonial violence
- Respects nature and protects the ecosystems across air, land and sea on which all life depends
- Calls into question the fears that have compelled Australia's visceral attachment to imperial power
- Cherishes our rich cultural diversity and constructively engages with our Asian and Pacific neighbours.

*How are we to translate this vision into concrete policies?
How do we endow human security with practical content?*

Let's first look at three critical aspects of human security: common security, cooperative security, and comprehensive security.

Common Security

If security policy is to deliver human security, it needs to be inclusive. Australia cannot secure for itself a peaceful environment, while ignoring the security of other nations.

The aim must be to reconcile the competing security concerns of different parties. Whether our concern is with the Korean conflict, rivalries in the South China Sea, energy security, or refugee flows, our words and our actions must strive for the common security of all stakeholders.



To do justice to this objective we must consult widely, not only with governments but also with the publics in whose name they speak.

Whether we are looking at a war torn country, be it Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, or Sri Lanka, or our Southeast Asian and Pacific neighbours, we need to build strong and respectful links with the peoples of those countries, and the organisations and community groups which most effectively give voice to their needs and aspirations.

Cooperative security

Respecting the legitimate security interests of others is necessary but not enough. We must also cooperate with them. In Australia's case, cooperation should give pride of place to the Asia-Pacific region, which does not mean neglecting other parts of the world.

Australia has a unique opportunity to pursue any number of joint initiatives with the likes of Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and New Zealand, as well as with regional bodies like ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum.

Important as they are, trade and business links are just one part of much larger cooperative effort. An active, cooperative diplomacy would involve:

- Strengthening the South Pacific and Southeast Asian nuclear weapons free zones
- Actively supporting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
- Advancing the proposal for a Northeast Asia nuclear weapons free zone
- Working towards the denuclearisation and eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula
- Putting forward new ideas for a comprehensive settlement of the Taiwan dispute
- Enhancing regional peacebuilding and peacekeeping capabilities in collaboration with the United Nations.
- Convening regional discussions that include China to explore active collaboration on climate change, pandemics, cyber security, organised crime, human trafficking, and other transnational challenges to security.

The steady rise of the Global South presents additional opportunities. Australia can actively support African countries who are calling for sweeping changes to the global financial system and new global taxes to fund climate change action.

In cooperation with small and middle powers, Australia can contribute to the renewal of global and regional institutions.

At a time when the Palestinian catastrophe has exposed as never before the impotence of the United Nations, a collaborative initiative is needed to strengthen the institution and press for the overdue reform of the Security Council.

In the meantime, militarism must be tamed by asserting the primacy of international law. The UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice should be strongly supported in the task of preventing and calling to account the illegal use of force, notably genocide and wars of aggression.

Cooperative engagement with Asia-Pacific neighbours has another crucial dimension, namely cultural literacy.

Considerable skill, energy and resources will be needed to familiarise Australians with the histories, cultures and languages of their neighbours

Comprehensive security

If security is to be approached holistically, it must be comprehensive. Human security means protection from all that threatens the life and dignity of human beings.

Comprehensive security is alert to the mortal dangers posed by external military attack, the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and other forms of physical violence.

But it is equally concerned with transnational crime, drug trafficking, failing states, piracy, human rights violations, refugee flows, climate change, pandemics, and economic arrangements that enrich the wealthy and exploit the poor.



These concerns cannot be viewed in isolation. They are closely interconnected – ethically, organisationally and geographically. A viable human security framework must engage the whole of government and the whole of society.

Federal, State and Local governments should jointly develop a coherent human security policy framework. A standing inter-governmental human security commission could bring together relevant ministries and departments, and regularly consult with the community sector.

For their part, community groups and organisations have a pivotal role to play in reenergising the national conversation. By working more closely together, and regularly exchanging insights and experiences, they can advance the long overdue reassessment of Australia's past and future.

The road ahead

Ours is a transformative moment. Australia, like other countries, needs to think long and hard about how it will respond to the immense risks and opportunities before us.

Wholesale changes in policy direction and resource allocation are needed. For any of this to come about, we need a substantial overhaul of the organisations, processes and personnel that presently security policy.

An institutional shift of this magnitude cannot happen overnight or by accident. It must be accompanied and sustained by a cultural shift.

It is time for Australians to reflect on the profound regional and global changes under way, the strategic choices before us, and the human resources at our disposal.

Only a mature and respectful national conversation can point us in the desired direction.

Leadership is unlikely to come from our mainstream media or from the political class. They are neither inclined nor well equipped for the task.

In the present climate, it is for the concerned citizenry to take the initiative. Though the obstacles are many, several possibilities suggest themselves.

Many organisations and community groups are working in areas negatively affected by our current security policies.

The development and overseas aid sector has had to contend with a steadily eroding aid budget and the devastating impact of wars in which we participate and oppressive regimes which we support.

Similarly, journalists, whistle blowers, human rights advocates, lawyers and others have had to confront national security laws which make a mockery of any notion of transparency or accountability.

Much the same can be said for our First Nations and their continuing struggle for recognition.

Others adversely affected work in such areas as poverty, homelessness, climate change, loss of biodiversity, public health, and threats to social cohesion.



All these sectors have much to contribute to the national conversation. So do professional networks and associations in education and health, trade unions, cooperatives of various kinds, think tanks and research centres, not to mention cultural and religious organisations.

We must find new ways of connecting the concerns, priorities and insights of these groups and networks.

To be effective human security discourse, and practice must help us connect across the boundaries of age, gender, faith, nationality, culture, status, occupational background, and even political viewpoints.

The conversation has to grow in diverse settings and formats: structured and informal, face to face and online. A wide range of resources are needed –from discussion papers and fact sheets to podcasts, workshops and webinars as well as use of traditional and social media.

The conversation must be conducted in English and other community languages. Nor can it rely just on the written and spoken word. It has to be enriched by the resources of the visual and performing arts, and even sport.



There is much that is positive on which to build. Many, young and old, of diverse backgrounds, feel frustrated by media hype, empty political noise, and uncaring institutions.

A re-energised younger generation is keen to address the ravages of climate change. Others beavering away on different fronts – Indigenous rights, civil liberties, animal rights, issues of war and peace, poverty, social inequality, and more generally the ethics of professional and public life – are looking to ways of building bridges.

In all of this, we must keep at the front of mind the priceless contribution of our First Nations. Their wisdom can inspire and energise the national conversation. Nor can we overlook the rich tapestry of our multicultural society.

In time, and after extensive discussion and preparation, it may be possible to initiate a number of community consultations. With human security in mind, they could:

- Review current policies and decision making processes in areas of interest to them
- Map out promising new directions and concrete steps to be taken, perhaps over the next five years.

These consultations could pave the way for statewide assemblies, and culminate in some kind of national assembly, allowing for both face to face and online participation.

Human security, we should remember, is not an end point. It is a pathway for rethinking the profound insecurities of our time.

In Australia's case, the question is: can we respond to these challenging times in ways that recognise the sovereignty of our First nations, the richness of our cultural diversity, and the hopes and aspirations of our Asian and Pacific neighbours?

To address these questions is to embark on a journey of renewal that is not just ecological, political, or economic, but profoundly cultural and spiritual.



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