Navigating challenges in Australia's defence strategy: Enhancing deterrence through cultural intelligence

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This blog contributes to the discussion on the Strategy of Denial outlined in the 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS) (Department of Defence, 2024, p. 22). In particular, the blog focuses on some of challenges that the ADF will need to overcome in order to achieve its primary strategic objective of deterrence, which is to "alter any potential adversary's belief that it could achieve its ambitions with military force at an acceptable cost" (Department of Defence, 2024, p. 22). The blog will cover deterrence theory, Australian defence strategy, and ways forward.

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence is a complex theory in security studies. In simple terms, deterrence simply means dissuading an actor to take an action by convincing them that the consequences of that decision will outweigh the benefits. In order for deterrence to be achieved, a country must have (1) the **capability** to impose consequences, (2) a clear means of **communication** message the consequences to an adversary and (3) the **credibility** to follow-through on the response. The NDS and rebuilt Integrated Investment Program clearly outline the steps Australia will take to implement the first factor. The effectiveness of this approach is outside the scope of this blog.

However, for Australia to successfully implement deterrence, it relies on firstly on identifying the actor you are trying to deter. Different actors are not deterred by the same means. Secondly, having a detailed understanding of the decision-making calculus of that actor. This understanding includes empathising with (different to agreeing to) their worldview, values, political, sociocultural, and psychosocial factors. For example, it can be reasonably argued that Vladimir Putin's decision to conduct Russia's illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine is an example of a failure to impose and enforce deterrence to deter Russia's aggression on 24 February 2022. Furthermore, assumptions that Putin would not order the invasion reflected a misreading of his decision-making calculus and its underpinnings. In particular, Putin's leadership psychology, drawing in among other factors such as, Russian strategic culture, a preference for pre-emptive action, perceptions of threat, entrenched belief in Russia's global role and perceived Russian historical 'rights' over Ukraine. The ongoing conflict remains a timely and tragic reminder of why 'knowing your enemy', through a proper understanding of how leaders and countries make decisions, is a critical foundation to deterrence.

Therefore, for Australia's strategy to work, we must be able to attain expert cultural intelligence on other actors. This cultural intelligence enables us to understand different actors' risk-tolerance and be able to calculate the way they assess benefits and consequences.

Cultural Intelligence

Australian deterrence could be strengthened by increasing our cultural intelligence and linguist skills. Improving genuine **cultural intelligence** will deepen our understanding of other actors, and their decision-making calculus, and ensure the development of informed options that raise the consequences above their risk tolerance and benefit threshold**. Enhanced language skills** allow us to better understand the original source of information or documentation, so we have a first-hand understanding of their contemporary thinking. It also importantly allows Australia to better communicate the consequences and benefits across a variety of media.

Increasing cultural intelligence will enhance Defence's ability to deliver the Strategy of Denial and to deter conflict before it begins. The Strategy of Denial serves as Defence's contribution to *National Defence* and integrated statecraft, which is a whole-of-government approach to advancing shared economic and security interests. Integrated statecraft requires Defence to build regional trust and confidence, and to be transparent on Australia's military capabilities and strategic intent. Defence has a critical role, working hand in hand with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in building and enhancing our lattice of relationships across the region to protect Australia's economic prosperity and security interests. It is through increasing cultural intelligence that Defence can enhance our collaboration with partners, and deepen our understanding of other actors in our region.

Moreover, deterrence theory, as outlined in the NDS*,* relies on an effective and highly skilled national intelligence community (NIC) (Department of Defence, 2024, p. 19). While the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) may not sit in the NIC, its analysts and officers are routinely posted within NIC agencies. We need our intelligence professionals to be able to effectively '**red team' and provide unique air-minded insights** into these integrated processes. What this might look like is analysts knowing not just likely formations, tactics, and numbers but how many casualties they are unwilling to accept—in essence what is that point where the costs outweigh the benefits. We must also be able to recognise and communicate how our platform-loss tolerance is likely to be different. Effective communication builds a workforce that knows the differences between us and a potential security challenge.

Challenges

Reduced people-people links makes it harder for Australia to build the required cultural and linguist intelligence understanding to effectively implement our deterrence strategy.

Additionally, the granting of **security clearances** in Australia is slow and even slower for migrants who had deep ties to a non-Australian country. It is slow because the time they spent outside of Australia may mean that their background can be more difficult to check and thus, lengthen the processing times (Department of Home Affairs, 2024, p. 90). The personnel issues caused by the slow granting of security clearances is well documented; however, it also means that there is less diversity in people being granted the highest level of clearance (Greene, 2023). This means that there is likely to be an underrepresentation in people with a non-Australian background holding those clearances. This problem is likely to compound in the future, with the 2021 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021) revealing that almost half of Australians have a parent who was born overseas, compared to 22% in 2001 (ABS, 2001).

For the same reason, it is unlikely that we are able to recruit people with a deep **language proficiency** of a particular country. A 2019 Defence census report (Australian Defence Force, 2020) indicated only "6%t of the permanent Australian Defence Force (ADF) members spoke a language other than English, compared to 28% of the population (ABS, 2021). People may point to the language programs within Defence to address this concern; however, many complex languages take over 12 to 24 months just to get to an intermediate level. Time is a

luxury that we do not have in the era of reduced strategic warning time. The danger of these two factors is that we could impose our worldview and decision-making calculus on others and risk repeating the mistakes of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine.

Way Forward

There are several short and long-term options that Australia can pursue to strengthen our cultural intelligence and ultimately deterrence.

First, greater emphasis could be placed on recruiting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This would also help the ADF be more representative of Australian society and harness the benefits of our diversity.

Second, Defence could lean more on academia, which is part of defence industry, and whole-of-government partners, such as the DFAT, to boost our knowledge of other actors.

Third, we can encourage greater military-to-military dialogue with other actors. While deeper engagement with some actors may seem counter-intuitive and carries operational and diplomatic risk, the risk of not talking is greater. Deterrence relies on understanding an actor and communicating with them. It provides an opportunity to shape their thinking and deter coercive activity. Greater military-military dialogue, augmented by improved cultural intelligence, will strengthen Australia's deterrence strategy.

References

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