

Increasing Australia's effectiveness as a United Nations Member-State – A viewpoint

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Most postwar Australian governments have repeatedly expressed commitment to the international rule of law and to the UN as the institutional system with responsibility for implementation of that principle. The Rudd Government, followed by the Gillard Government with Rudd as Foreign Minister, took important steps to renew and strengthen Australian engagement with the UN by, for example:

- Making explicit Australia's commitment to the international rule of law
- Paying increasing attention to the issues being addressed by UN forums and attending UN meetings
- Nominating for membership of the Security Council in 2013-14
- Setting a target for increasing overseas aid to 0.5 per cent of national income by 2015-16
- Emphasising Australian participation in peacekeeping missions; and
- Establishing the Evans/Kawaguchi Commission on International Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament.

These were striking advances. A second round of policy renewal would strengthen Australia's effectiveness as a fully engaged UN Member State. This should particularly deal with the inconsistencies between the requirements of Member States in the UN Charter and existing Australian policy. Six inconsistencies which require attention are: the offensive orientation of the 2009 Defence White Paper; inadequate financial support for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; the neglect of practical peaceful conflict resolution; the impoverishment of departmental and scholarly work on disarmament; the inadequacies of voluntary contributions to multilateral (involving many

states) and bilateral (involving only two states) development programs; and the limitations of government support for NGOs (Non Government Organisations) involved in concrete programs for strengthening international peace, justice, public education and scholarship. In the following discussion of these matters, Norwegian foreign policy is used as a model of international best practice and compared with Australian foreign policy to help illustrate the arguments.

First, the 2009 Defence White Paper moved Australian military strategy away from 'defensive defence' towards 'offensive defence'. It focused on forward projections of forces, strike capability and high technology weapons systems. It visualised enormous purchases of weapons – including 12 new submarines; air-warfare destroyers and a new class of frigates; 100 F-35 joint strike fighters and more. At the time of the paper's release, the rationale that was given for the new policy was that there was increasing uncertainty in the strategic security environment and therefore a need to better position Australia to respond to the broad range of possible conflicts. The then Defence Minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, said that the aim of the White Paper program was to build, over the next 20 years, one of the most capable defence forces in the region.

At first consideration this might seem an appropriate aim for Australia. But the White Paper discussed Australian defence as if it was in a silo, isolated from other dimensions of foreign affairs. One striking example was the size of the defence budget for 2010-11 which was increased by \$1.57 billion to \$26.8 billion. In the same budget the appropriation for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was \$1.1 billion. So, the increase in Australian military spending in 2010-11 is about 50 per cent greater than the total allocation for diplomacy. Furthermore, the full program will be paid for by automatic annual increases

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of four to five per cent in military spending in each of the next 20 years, regardless of circumstances. No other area of Australian public expenditure has ever been promised such largesse for such a long period. This treatment of the military, as uniquely deserving of financial support when every other area of public outlays is constrained, is not warranted by the strategic situation. It contrasts strikingly with the cuts to military spending which are being discussed, or are underway, in other developed countries. Australia is not threatened by any country nor is it likely to be in the foreseeable future.

Second, the lack of adequate attention to diplomacy is especially damaging when Australia has 18 per cent fewer diplomats posted overseas than in 1996, while in the rest of the public service there are now 12 per cent more staff. There are fewer Australian diplomatic posts overseas than the posts of any other member of the G20, with missions in only half the capitals of the world. Yet diplomacy is the prime means of avoiding conflict, as well as representing Australian interests overseas. Why should Australia stand out amongst developed and large developing countries as lacking an adequately funded diplomatic service? Foreign affairs funding in all areas should rather be incrementally redirected. Australian military spending should be carefully reviewed, major weapons orders should be cut or even cancelled and total spending progressively and substantially reduced to make way for far higher priority political, diplomatic and developmental activity.

Third, the Defence White Paper fails to mention the first and principal requirement of UN Member States, which is to attempt by all reasonable means to avoid the threat or use of force and to seek non-violent means of minimising and resolving conflict. The UN Charter is the foundational document of postwar multilateral relations. The highest priority is set in Article 1 of the Charter which describes the first purpose of the UN as being:

“To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and the removal of threats, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.”

It would therefore be consistent with Australia's obligations as a UN member-state, as well as with the aim of strengthening security, to attempt to become a peacemaker. There can be no doubt about the value of such an attempt. The cost of mediation is a tiny fraction of the cost of military intervention. The possibility of minimising death and destruction through concerted peacemaking and peacekeeping is a strikingly attractive possibility wherever it can be achieved. It is far more cost effective to resolve disputes peacefully, if that is possible, than to try and settle them through war. Therefore, the humanitarian and financial incentives for peaceful conflict resolution are enormous. The question for Australia is whether it has the capacity for such action?

Australians are a particularly tolerant people and most Australians acknowledge the benefits of a stable and peaceful society. Australia has a proud record of support for UN peacekeeping, most recently within the nearby region in Timor-Lesté, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. Australian leaders on all sides of politics have frequently talked of our geographic location as the basis for building a bridge between developed and developing countries, though none have been sufficiently imaginative or generous about policies to fully implement that vision. Several Australian universities already have peace and conflict studies giving training in conflict resolution processes. The Global Peace Index was founded by an Australian international technology entrepreneur and philanthropist, Steve Killelea. There are many skilled Australians already working on the resolution of domestic and community conflicts within Australia and on similar tasks in other countries through the UN and various international NGOs (INGOs).

Norway is the leading example of a country working effectively as a peacemaker, although there are others that have begun to attempt reconciliation and mediation work. Within Norway there is increasing talk of the *dugnad principle*, of the value of cooperative community effort in carrying out a project or resolving a conflict.

An example of such a cooperative international effort followed the Kenyan Presidential election in December 2007. It aimed to prevent a potentially genocidal conflict between the Luos and the Kikuyu. The successful peacemaking effort involved concerted engagement by several countries and INGOs led by Kofi Annan, the former UN

Secretary-General, and was largely funded and facilitated by Norway. The engagement of several actors committed to peaceful conflict resolution may often be essential to effective reconciliation.

Not having Norway's established tradition of engagement in peaceful conflict resolution, could Australia develop credibility in this area? The answer would depend on the processes adopted. They would have to be careful, patient and completely without condescension. At present, few, if any, DFAT officers work full time on peaceful conflict resolution. The Department would have to build its capacity for engagement in conflict resolution through, for example, establishing a branch of professional staff trained in mediation and the other means suggested in the UN Charter for peaceful settlement of disputes. It might well also cooperate with professional mediation INGOs. Establishment of a DFAT unit would be helped by substantial improvement in DFAT's funding, as advocated above. Peacemaking would be a far less costly approach to strengthening security than endlessly increasing military spending, as well as being more effective and constructive.

Fourth, the Norwegian policies on disarmament are ones which the Australian Government should consider. There is a strong case for similar action. The principal requirement is a clear, unequivocal, commitment to nuclear disarmament. This could begin by removing the Bush-era title of the DFAT section working on disarmament, the Arms Control and Counter-Proliferation Branch, and replacing it with a title such as Disarmament and Non-proliferation, like that of the equivalent Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Section. A second requirement is to substantially increase funding for the branch, to enable it to build professional competence in disarmament policy, negotiation, public education and much else, so that in due course it could begin to take significant initiatives.

Fifth, Norway is an inspiration for addressing the inconsistency between Australia's obligations as a UN Member State and its actual performance. Australian aid in 2010-11 was estimated to be 0.33 per cent of national income. This is far short of the UN target of 0.7 per cent of national income. Australia's aid budget also falls short of the actual overall performance of the EU of 0.48 per cent and of Norway's contribution of over one per cent. The Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, and the Opposition spokesperson on

foreign affairs, Julie Bishop, have promised to bring Australia's contribution to 0.5 per cent of national income by 2015-16. Even if that major improvement is achieved, Australia would still not be providing its fair share of the financial support needed for the UN to effectively fulfil its mandates, for the Millennium Development Goals to be met or for effective climate change mitigation policies to be implemented.

The Australian aid agency, AusAID, could also learn much from Norwegian aid policy. The Norwegian aid policy bureau, NORAD, and the innovative policies and practices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are models of good practice in development aid. They should be added to the list of institutions from which AusAID attempts to learn. A particularly impressive example of principled Norwegian aid was the decision by the Norwegian Government to set aside loans which it had made to developing countries to fund the purchase of Norwegian ships. The Government concluded that the loans were illegitimate because they had been made primarily to assist Norwegian ship-builders rather than to assist the overseas borrowers. It decided to make the loans without these trade conditions aimed at benefiting Norway's economy.

Sixth, one of the most striking features of the Norwegian model of foreign affairs is the importance of NGOs and academic bodies in contributing to Norwegian support for the international rule of law, understanding about the UN, peaceful conflict resolution, development, human rights and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The five largest Norwegian NGOs have a combined staff of several thousand worldwide and are increasingly operating on behalf of the UN and with funding from outside Norway. There are six Norwegian research institutes/think tanks specialising in studies on international assistance, peace research, international cooperation and human rights that each have a staff of 50 – 120, largely funded by government grants.

The UN Association of Norway has a staff of over 30, most of whom are involved in school and public education about the UN, virtually all financed by the Government's contribution. The Australian Government could learn from that example by quickly and sharply strengthening its support beyond research on military aspects of security. Far better funding of programs, scholarship and education about

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international relations including multilateral relations, disarmament, conflict resolution, development, handling of refugees and other aspects of human rights would transform Australia's international contribution and domestic awareness.

Surely it is not utopian to imagine that Australia could make significant moves in strengthening multilateral engagement; reducing provocative and wasteful military spending; starting official work on peaceful conflict resolution; adopting official programs aimed at nuclear disarmament; being more active in support of development and poverty reduction; reducing green house gas emissions; and helping NGOs working on all these tasks. Such policies are in Australia's national interest because they would enhance Australia's contribution to international peace and justice.

Useful sources

Medical Association for the Prevention of War, *Vision 2030: An Alternative Approach to Australian Security*, with a forward by The Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser, available from mapw@mapw.org.au or PO Box 1379, Carlton Vic 3053

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Last revised January 2012