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Department of Defence – Opening Statement

‘Australia’s future Activities and responsibilities in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic Waters’

Friday 26 September 2014

I welcome the opportunity to talk to you about an area of strategic interest for Australia.

Australia has significant national interests in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters, including sovereign rights to resources within our Exclusive Economic Zone, and international search and rescue obligations in accordance with applicable conventions.

Defence, in partnership with other agencies, regularly reviews the strategic environment to weight the level of effort in support of these interests.

It is our view, as expressed in our last Defence White Paper, that Australia’s national interests to our south are unlikely to be challenged in a manner that requires a substantial military response over the coming decades.

But as we indicated in our submission to this inquiry, noting the increasing international activity and interest in the region, it is likely that our interests could be challenged, especially if resources elsewhere become more scarce.

It will remain important to monitor developments, and this is no small feat given the vastness and remoteness of Australia’s maritime territory.

Defence’s ability to conduct tasking in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters is framed, and limited, by three key aspects; the Antarctic Treaty System and its strict controls on military activities, personnel and equipment; the unique operating environment; and the primacy afforded by the Government to civil agencies to coordinate and lead activities in this region.

Given the level of threat, and competing demands for Defence resources elsewhere, Defence considers it appropriate that civil agencies are the first responder. But when required, and able to do so, Defence can support other Government departments and agencies to ensure that Australia meets its security and international responsibilities.

The success of the Antarctic Treaty System and associated conventions in limiting military activity means that our southern approaches have not had to feature strongly in Defence planning.

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What this means in practice is that Defence is not currently structured to carry out sub-Antarctic tasks and has maintained only a few capabilities suited to the unique and demanding operating environment of the Southern Ocean.

Navy has one ice-strengthened vessel that has limited capability to operate in light ice. The remainder of the Navy's Major Fleet Units are not suited to operate in the sub-Antarctic region for any duration beyond a compelling search and rescue venture.

Air Force does have aircraft with the range to operate in the region, including the AP-3C Orion maritime patrol and the C-17A Globemaster transport aircraft. But competing demands for these airframes are high.

Further, whilst Defence is acquiring new capabilities technically able to contribute to situational awareness and responsiveness within the Southern Ocean, they have not been acquired expressly for this purpose and the extent to which they are able to do so will depend on the threat environment and other demands on their capability.

The 2015 Defence White Paper will review these policy settings, but it is at this stage unlikely that future Defence activities in this region will deviate significantly from current activities. Defence will continue to monitor developments in the region and where required, maintain its high level of cooperation with Government departments and agencies operating in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of Defence's submission or the content of this statement.

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