

2nd August 2021

Submission to the Inquiry into the Defence Report 2019/2020

I have read through the Defence Report to give my perspective to this Inquiry. The Defence Report was a highly readable and compelling document. It outlines much of the good work that the Australian Defence Force is doing domestically, regionally and internationally. It is a good report of their operations and basis for discussion about Australia's security interests going into the future. I appreciate the clear aims and objectives outlined in the report, namely the mission to "defend Australia and its national interests to advance Australia's security and prosperity."¹ It is also good to see the new emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, noting that Australia has strong interests in our close region.

There are various areas of concern for Australia's security and prosperity, which the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will need to respond to. The preeminent threat is climate change, including exacerbating extreme weather events and other environmental conditions in Australia and our region. Domestically, this could increase the severity of drought, bushfires, floods and other weather events that the Defence Force will be called to assist on. This includes bolstering the capability of firefighters and other first responders, who could well be overwhelmed by these disasters. We saw this with the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfire season, described as "bushfires of unprecedented scale, duration, and devastating impact."² The work of the ADF in supporting Australian communities and emergency workers was commendable and highly beneficial.

Climate change also impacts on a regional level. Natural disasters such as floods, sea level rise, bushfires and other events will impact severely on our Pacific Island or Large Ocean State neighbours. This will put additional strain on the ADF in providing disaster relief or humanitarian missions. It will also increase instability or increase migration, which will increase

¹ Department of Defence, *Annual Report 19-20*, ii.

² Report, 2, 5.

challenges. It is good to see a spirit of cooperation and friendship in planning to “deepen and strengthen its ... ties with Australia’s neighbours and partners” to build a “secure, prosperous and resilient region.”³ The ADF has an important role to play in the Pacific Step-Up program.⁴ It is heartening to see the mutual bonds that we have formed with our regional neighbours, including with them aiding during the 2019-2020 bushfire season.⁵

My main contribution would be to emphasise the threat of climate change and other natural disasters impacting on Australian communities and increasing the demand on the ADF. This is a challenge for the ADF, but also should remind us of the severe threats posed by climate change, which will require both adaptation and mitigation. With weak mitigation action, this will place Australian communities and strategic interests at threat and place greater strain on ADF operations and personnel. This is an issue where our regional and international allies are watching Australia closely on, and poor action by Australia can affect our relationships negatively (particularly with Pacific Island nations most at threat from climate change and sea level rise or other extreme weather events). The Australian Defence Force is responding commendably to the challenges of extreme weather events - including domestically and regionally - and working on sustainability plans.⁶ We need better political leadership to acknowledge and act on environmental issues to make sure that their efforts are supported.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Benjamin Cronshaw.

Bibliography

Australian Government, Department of Defence, *Annual Report 19-20, 2020*.

³ Report, 2.

⁴ Report, 8; On this subject, I have also made a submission to the Inquiry into Australia’s Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations: Submission 4 - and the Inquiry into strengthening Australia’s relationships with countries in the Pacific region: Submission 1.

⁵ Report, 8-9.

⁶ Report, 156.