

Submission to the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and

Trade: *Inquiry into the benefits and risks of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, as a basis of planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability.*

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Bipartisan cooperation is a widely-admired feature of Australia's current approach to defence policy. It is believed to contribute to the development of good policy, build national unity and protect those serving in the Australian defence forces. Bipartisanship is regularly advocated by political leaders and recent polling¹ indicates clear majorities of the Australian public support it. However, given the increasingly difficult environment Australia currently faces, it is wise to ask whether further deepening of an already heavily entrenched bipartisan practice will strengthen Australia's defence policy and overall security.

In this submission, I argue that bipartisanship as it currently operates in Australia is not only failing to meet its expectations but actively impeding Australia's national security. As such it would be an error to adopt a formal bipartisan structure for defence policy. Instead, it is more politics and contestation of defence policy via our elected representatives which Australia needs to deal with these uncertain times.

Australia has had an effectively bipartisan approach to defence policy since the early 1980s. While bipartisanship emerged as an outcome of both genuine agreement and as a guiding spirit believed to improve national policymaking, it has served to reduce policy quality, creativity, flexibility and accountability. Rather than rely on our parliament to stress test ideas, ensure responsibility for (inevitable) errors, and encourage widespread public and policy engagement with strategic questions, the habit of bipartisanship has restricted engagement and consideration of Australia's strategic and defence challenges.

The fundamental assumption of bipartisanship is that elites are better at making strategic decisions, or can do so independently of politics. This is doubtful. Many of the key defence challenges facing Australia are not technical, but political, going to the kind of country we are, the commitments we make to others, the order we wish to live in and the costs we would pay to enable and protect that order. There is no consensus among

¹ For polling data see appendix to: Andrew Carr, *I'm here for an argument: Why bipartisanship on security makes Australia less safe*, Discussion paper, The Australia Institute, Canberra, August 2017.

Australia's national security community as to the answers to these questions, and any reliable policy choice must reflect deep public support for the answer, rather than a minority elite presumption.

As our society no longer believes in in master economic planners, why should we put our faith in master strategists, who not only need to coordinate foreign and defence policies, but integrate economics, technology and geography as well? Nor can decision making ever be free from politics. Academic studies of authoritarian societies show that even leaders who don't need to worry about polls or re-election always factor in domestic political calculations when deciding strategic issues.² Bipartisanship does not keep politics out, it simply hides it from the public.

Australia's currently high levels of defence bipartisanship are in turn leading to lower public unity and undermining careful management of our defence forces. With defence issues rarely debated in the parliament, the scope for the media to cover these topics in depth and the public to learn and engage is reduced. Defence's own polling indicates that a strong majority of the public 'did not feel they received enough information or explanation about the ADF and defence policy'.³

Nor has bipartisan agreement between our major parties been sufficient to guarantee support for ADF personnel serving overseas. For instance public opinion has turned against support for Australia's participation in the conflict in Afghanistan since 2008, despite strong bipartisan agreement. Academic studies in America and Australia indicate that public support is tied to a sense that the correct strategic policy is being pursued, but as bipartisanship reduces the quality and flexibility of strategic policy, it undermines public support from the start.

The presumption that bipartisanship can deliver stable management and support for the troops is also questionable. Former ADF personnel such as Andrew Hastie MP, James Brown (President of the NSW RSL) and Professor Peter Leahy (University of Canberra) have gone on the record to declare they did not feel there was —or is— enough intellectual engagement between the politicians and serving troops. Nor is there stability of

² Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2005); Natasha Hamilton-Hart, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³ Peter Jennings et al., *Guarding against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence: Report on Community Consultations*, ed. Department of Defence (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). p.5

oversight. Australia is now on to its 11th Defence Minister since 1996. In contrast there have been just five Treasurers in that time, despite economics being a much more partisan area of debate.

These costs would be troubling at the best of times, but considering the worsening strategic trends of Asia in the early 21st century, they are unacceptable. Given the central challenge of our current strategic environment is its uncertainty, it is doubtful whether an approach based on consensus and cooperation is appropriate.

Certainly, the alternative to bipartisanship —open, partisan argument— has obvious downsides and problems.

Yet I believe Australia must embrace – rather than restrict – its democratic structures as it seeks to think through and respond to the increasingly turbulent Asian century. This does not mean abandoning core national principles such as the ANZUS alliance or a strong Australian Defence Force (ADF). It does however mean asking hard questions, in public, about the roles and expectations in that alliance, the future size and shape of the ADF and the costs and contributions the public and industry may have to pay for our security.

This submission therefore argues against developing a ‘Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement’ and instead urges the committee to recognise and promote the importance of parliamentary debate as a strategic necessity and proven democratic strength for shaping Australian defence policy. Having studied the operation of bipartisanship in Australian defence policy for some years now, and published both an academic article on the topic⁴, and a major public report⁵, I believe moving to a formal Bipartisan Defence Agreement would:

- Exacerbate the growing divide between the public and the political class on matters of national security, undermining public confidence in national defence policy.
- Reduce policy creativity, flexibility and accountability, impeding the responsiveness, adequacy and vitality of national security policy settings.
- Contravene Westminster principles and undermine the authority and independence of the parliament to shape and authorise national policy.
- Fail to provide stable or long term control of defence policy given inevitable need for executive flexibility, particularly in crisis situations.

⁴ See: Andrew Carr. ‘The cost of bipartisanship in Australian defence and security policy’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 2017, 63 (2), 254-269, 2017.

⁵ Andrew Carr, *I’m here for an argument: Why bipartisanship on security makes Australia less safe*, Discussion paper, The Australia Institute, Canberra, August 2017.

I believe Australia's politicians seek bipartisanship from the best of motives. They take their responsibility for the nation's security extremely seriously. Yet, given the nature of our security environment and the difficulties we face crafting and implementing an effective and popular defence policy, more bipartisanship via a formal model is likely to impede rather than improve Australia's search for security.

As such, it should be rejected. I would be happy to expand further on any of the points raised in this submission as convenient and useful for the committee's inquiry.

Kind regards,

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