



Gavin Pearce MP
Federal Member for Braddon

Opinion

1 May 2023

‘It takes a country to defend a country’ National Defence: *Defence Strategic Review*

The Australian Government’s National Defence *Defence Strategic Review*, that assessed ‘whether Australia had the necessary defence capability, posture and preparedness to best defend Australia and its interests in the strategic environment we now face’, was released last Monday.

From the outset I want to state that I was profoundly disappointed that this vital report was released on the eve of Anzac Day. This is a day that should always stand alone in its importance to our nation, to commemorate those who have served, continue to serve and those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for doing so. I believe that the timing of the release of this report lacked judgement and the respect Anzac Day deserves.

The Defence Strategic Review (DSR), in its assessment of Australia’s strategic environment stated:

‘Australia’s region, the Indo-Pacific, faces increasing competition that operates on multiple levels – economic, military, strategic and diplomatic – all interwoven and all framed by an intense contest of values and narratives. A large-scale conventional and non-conventional military build-up without strategic reassurance is contributing to the most challenging circumstances in our region for decades. Combined with rising tensions and reduced warning time for conflict, the risks of military escalation or miscalculation are rising.’

As a veteran with a 20-year career in the Defence Force, this is an assessment that I concur with, and one I’m passionate about lending my voice to. In my role as the Federal Member for Braddon, I’m committed to ensuring that the government’s priority-1 is the protection of our country’s security, interests, and livelihoods.

Looking through both these lenses, I believe that this report fails on multiple fronts to deliver the actions that this nation requires.

The DSR’s recommendation to support Precision Strike Missiles is paramount, given the rise of the ‘missile age’ in modern warfare, and the proliferation of long-range precision strike guided weapons. I’m baffled however by the recommendation that the LAND 400 Phase 3 – Land Combat Vehicle System (Infantry Fighting Vehicle) acquisition be reduced from 450 to 129 vehicles, and that we reduce our personnel to one Battle Group.

I wish we lived in a dream world, where we can just push a button from inner city Sydney and a missile will come out of somewhere and that would be enough to deter an enemy. But

we don't. That's very far from the reality. The reality is, any move to increase our missile assets will proportionately increase the threat of adversaries seeking to undermine or destroy that capability. Therefore, our Precision Strike Missile launch capability must be protected. That protection comes in the form of soldiers, and in turn those soldiers must be protected, and that comes in the form of armoured vehicles.

And to even entertain the idea that our defence force doesn't need armoured vehicles, flies in the face of the current situation in Ukraine and the role our critically acclaimed Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicles are playing in the current battle space.

This flawed decision also has trickle-down ramifications for the ongoing viability of our defence manufacturing industry.

Looking solely at the North-West Coast of Tasmania, Elphinstone, Delta Hydraulics, Penguin Composites, Direct Edge, Jayben and others collectively augment our defence manufacturing space. But to continue to do so, their business model must be sustainable and that requires a pipeline of projects sufficient to justify the significant capital investment required.

Without this critical mass, we're at real risk of losing our highly sought after, worlds-best-skills, IP and R&D to other countries like Poland, who are serious about manufacturing and their armoured personnel carrier capability. Our domestic defence manufacturing expertise will follow the capital. If that's not in Australia, it will be offshore. Once that capability is lost, it's lost forever.

In response to recommendations of the DSR the government has announced a \$1.6 billion package for long range strike capabilities to grow the ADF's ability to accurately strike targets at longer range and expand acquisition of long-range missile systems. This will result in the range for artillery growing from 40 kilometres to in excess of 500 kilometres. According to the federal government, this investment will reshape the Army and modernise it for its current strategic circumstances.

I respectfully disagree. As an example, the Dong Feng-26 (DF26) is a Chinese intermediate-range precision guided ballistic missile. It's 14m long (as long as a semitrailer), it weighs 20 tonnes (as much as a truck), it's capable of carrying a thermonuclear warhead weighing up to 1800kg (as big as a Toyota Hilux), its range is up to 5000 kms and it flies at Mki8 (2 1/2 thousand kms/hr). I would say that the federal government's \$1.6 billion investment does not equip us for 'current strategic circumstances' and leaves us well short of where we must be.

The government has pushed the Surface Naval Capability Upgrade to yet another enquiry, but we must get on and build this capability. Missiles need projection and our naval assets will be crucial to enabling our relatively short-range missiles to be projected further into the area of operations.

A very wise person once said, it takes more than a defence force to defend a country. It takes a country to defend a country.

Yes, of course we need missile capability. Yes, of course we need missile intercept capability. But you cannot compartmentalise the defence of our nation. Nothing works in isolation and this report seems fragmented.

As someone who served within the Australian Army Signals Intelligence Community, I'm disappointed that there was no reconfirming commitment to REDSPICE, the Australian Signals Directorate's (ASD) most significant investment in its 75-year history. To meet our

ever-increasing threats, the federal government's commitment to ASD must be unrelenting and the organisation must be intrinsically bound around every defence decision made.

There is also insufficient consideration (or a linear consideration at best) of what is termed 'grey zone operations' - the grey area between peace and war - that includes threats to our crucial supply chain links including maritime approaches, political interference, cyber threats and attacks, economic coercion, infrastructure hacking etc.

The primary targets of this form of 'warfare' will not be defence but our businesses, our cyber systems and databases, our trade, through economic sanctions, or our underwater submersible assets that link Australia, through to New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Guam.

The ever-increasing threat environment justifies the federal government's commitment and an increase in our defence spending. The DSR however contained no new money. At best it was simply a reannouncement of programs that are already progressing, the cutting of some important projects and the referral of others, like the Surface Naval Capability Upgrade, back to an inquiry.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update identified much of what has simply been reiterated in this review. From my perspective, what we needed was a broader, fully encompassing review that included the entirety and complexity of our national defence, including trade supply chains, our ports, rail links, communications and data channels, as well as the full range of grey zone operations.

ENDS