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Our defence arm can be readied for double duty

The primary role of the Australian Defence Force will always be defence of Australia and its national interests – unlike China, where the main role of the People’s Liberation Army is defence of the Chinese Communist Party. (I suspect few Australians would be prepared to die protecting our major political parties.)

Because the ADF’s main role is warfighting, much of its time is spent on training for conflict. But there’s something the military could be doing that is almost as important as its main role – and that’s training to respond professionally for emergency relief tasks, both in Australia and within the Southeast Asia/Southwest Pacific region. Realistically, there is now much greater likelihood of the ADF being used on emergency relief tasks than overseas military deployments, particularly as we are no longer deployed to the Middle East or Afghanistan. Climate change is a much greater existential threat to our national security than China’s military.

How could the ADF be better prepared for this secondary role? In the US army, as in the Australian army, a newly commissioned officer receives a corps allocation, such as infantry or artillery. But after an American officer’s fifth or sixth year of service, he or she is expected to have achieved a “functional area” designation as well. This is a specific skillset in which the officer is proficient. For example, an infantry officer with training in communications and public speaking could have a secondary role in public affairs.

What we could be doing in Australia is requiring officers and senior NCOs to have a secondary skill in emergency management-related areas as part of their normal career progression.

That would make the ADF much better prepared for assistance to government in responding to natural disasters, evacuating civilians, and other emergency tasks. It’s not good enough to say the ADF is already competent to perform these tasks when an army helicopter caused the Namadgi National Park fire in 2020.

Perhaps related to that incident is the importance of ensuring that equipment we have in-service is suitable for both military and civilian emergency roles. Obviously, combat platforms, such as fighter aircraft, aren’t relevant to a civilian role, but many RAAF and army aircraft can be used for such tasks as waterbombing, monitoring bushfires, delivering emergency material and food, and the evacuation of civilians in peril. The army should also have a lot more amphibious vehicles for use in flooded areas.

The Royal Australian Engineers could be used to do more, noting that the US Army Corps of Engineers’ mission is to “deliver vital public and military engineering services; partnering in peace and war to strengthen our nation’s security, energise the economy and reduce risks from disasters”. US Army Engineers are continually engaged on major infrastructure projects to reduce the impact of natural disasters.

The navy has an important role to play but needs vessels that can deploy quickly and conduct coastal evacuations or deliver relief supplies. Large, fast catamarans should be part of its inventory. The navy lacks the capability to respond quickly to coastal disaster relief situations, as was obvious in the bushfire evacuation from Mallacoota. That’s not a criticism, but a comment on a shortcoming in its vessel inventory.

The navy should have at least one large, high-speed, wave-piercing catamaran of the kind built by Incat in Tasmania or Austal in Perth. The navy chartered one such vessel of 1250 tonnes displacement in June 1999 and commissioned her the HMAS Jervis Bay. That ship was used as a fast troop and equipment transport between Australia and East Timor in support of the INTERFET peacekeeping task force until May 2001, when it was returned to the builder. The US navy was so impressed by the ship that it encouraged Austal to set up in the US, where it is now the sole supplier of this class of vessel to the US navy at a cost of less than $250m each.

The Australian foreign assistance potential for use of these vessels is huge, with natural disasters in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific being regular occurrences where response by such a vessel would be invaluable. Defence infrastructure in Australia, such as airfields and port facilities, should also be sized for dual purposes – primarily to enable Australian and US combat forces to operate but also to enable the ADF to respond to foreseeable natural disasters.

The ADF is now regularly used in ways never previously envisaged. The Kabul airlift was one recent example. Covid-19-related support is another.

The ADF is too large and valuable a resource for it not to be professionally cross-trained and equipped for vital civilian support activities.

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